Needs Assessment Guide

For The

Nutrition Education And Training Program

United States Department of Agriculture
Food and Nutrition Service

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Preface

Performing a needs assessment is a regulatory requirement of the Nutrition Education and Training Program (NET). As a minimum over the five-year authorization period, each of the 15 areas identified in Section 227.36 of the NET regulations must be addressed. It is the responsibility of the State NET Coordinator to conduct the needs assessment to obtain data for planning and managing the NET Program. This Guide was developed to assist NET Coordinators in improving and strengthening the needs assessment process.

This Guide is necessarily written from the standpoint of planning and conducting an ideal needs assessment as described in the NET regulations. However, it should be recognized that since current funding of NET is significantly below authorized levels, the design and scope of the needs assessment may be affected. Each NET Coordinator is challenged to plan and manage the needs assessment process within the constraints of his/her own State.

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SECTION 1: *Introduction*

PURPOSE

The purpose of this Needs Assessment Guide is to provide guidance to State Agencies in the needs assessment process required by FNS regulations for the Nutrition Education and Training Program (NET) and defined by the Strategic Plan for Nutrition Education (1993). Furthermore, this Guide can be used to facilitate closer coordination between the NET Program and other aspects of a State's Child Nutrition Programs' training and education initiatives.

CHILD NUTRITION ACT OF 1966 AS AMENDED

Section 19 of the "Act" authorized the Nutrition Education and Training Program.

NET REGULATIONS

FNS regulations 7 CFR Part 227 describe the implementation and operation requirements of the Nutrition Education and Training Program. The regulations (Section 227.36(b)) specify that the "needs assessment should be an ongoing process and provide not only data on current activities but also a description of problems and needs in each category and whether training or materials would help alleviate the problems." Section 227.36 of the regulations which delineates the needs assessment requirements is included in the Appendix H.

THE STRATEGIC PLAN FOR NUTRITION EDUCATION

In March of 1992, the Nutrition and Technical Services Division of the Food and Nutrition Service, USDA initiated a strategic planning process for the Nutrition Education and Training Program. The purpose of that initiative was to identify the vision or future profile of the NET Program and to outline a strategic plan for realizing that vision. The Strategic Plan begins with a philosophy statement which reflects the values and principles important to the NET community.

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Philosophy Of The NET Program

The Nutrition Education and Training Program (NET), through its local, State and federal partnerships, provides leadership in promoting healthy eating habits to improve the health and well-being of our nation's children. NET integrates mealtime and learning experiences to help children make informed food choices as part of a healthy lifestyle. This is accomplished by:

- identifying and addressing the nutrition education and food service training needs of diverse target audiences;
- applying scientifically-based nutrition information, recognized food service management techniques, and sound education principles in meeting these needs; and
- seeking opportunities to improve children's nutritional status by cooperating and collaborating with others to achieve mutual goals.

The participants in the strategic planning process recognized that the definition of a vision and strategic direction for the NET Program should provide the basis for decision-making, policy determination, and resource allocations well into the 21st century. Thus, they identified three primary areas of strategic thrusts toward which the majority of the Program's efforts and resources should be targeted. These include: (1) nutrition education and training, (2) nutritious meal service, and (3) leadership. Ten clearly defined strategic goals were then established for those target areas, and suggested strategies and tactics were outlined which would contribute to the accomplishment of the goals. The development of the NET Strategic Plan, thus, provides the *broad framework* for the development of strategic and operations plans at the State level.

The *broad framework* described in the NET Strategic Plan defines the *desired status* of the NET Program from a national perspective and provides *direction* for the identification of initiatives, programs of activity, and action plans at the State level. State Agencies are encouraged to use the NET Strategic Plan as a model for development of a strategic plan at the State level. Convening a strategic planning conference with a group of carefully chosen representatives to develop a State strategic plan provides the mechanism for the development of a common philosophy, a vision, and a strategic plan that will provide a common focus for all State-level nutrition education and training efforts.

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The strategic planning process incorporates the needs assessment as a critical part of it. In order for an individual State to establish specific goals and objectives for a NET State Plan, a process to define nutrition education and training needs must be established. This process, the needs assessment, should provide data which is relevant, authentic, and timely. The NET Coordinator is responsible for conducting a needs assessment as part of administering the NET Program.

Role of the NET Coordinator

The role of the NET Coordinator necessarily involves a whole wardrobe of "hats." One of those hats is needs analyst. The needs analyst role includes the responsibilities of planning and conducting needs assessments internally or planning and monitoring contracts for needs assessments conducted by a contractor (consultant) external to the State Agency. Since the NET regulations require needs assessment as a basis for the NET State Plan, all NET Coordinators must obtain data on nutrition education and training needs. However, how that data is obtained will vary from State to State. NET Coordinators in States with minimum NET funding must carefully evaluate the needs assessment methods to be used in order to obtain the necessary data using the minimum funding. NET Coordinators in States with more funding have greater leeway in determining how to obtain needs assessment data. Most NET Coordinators will have to develop a Master Plan for needs assessment which sets up a three-to-five year cycle for obtaining data from specific populations in different years. This approach to needs assessment planning is described in Section 5. The first step the NET Coordinator must take is to get organized for a needs assessment.

How to get organized

The following steps will help the NET Coordinator or other needs analyst get organized to plan and conduct a needs assessment.

- Review this Guide which includes the regulatory requirements for a needs assessment.
- Discuss the needs assessment process with the Director of the Child Nutrition Programs and representatives of other agencies which target the same populations as the NET Program.
- Assemble a Needs Assessment Task Force for input into the process. A task force is recommended as a desirable step in the process but it is not required.
- Determine the questions to be answered in the needs assessment process with input from the task force and/or representatives of the Child Nutrition Program (CNP) staff and other agencies.

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- Develop a Master Plan for the needs assessment process.
- Decide whether the needs assessment will be planned and conducted within the agency or by an external contractor.
- Conduct the needs assessment within the State Agency or through a contract.
- Analyze the needs assessment findings and prepare the NET State Plan.

The NET regulations specify that the needs assessment should identify problems "...where inservice training or materials (or nutrition education) can assist in alleviating those problems." The findings of a needs assessment may very well bring to light problems which cannot be alleviated through training and nutrition education. However, the problems can and should be addressed as part of the overall management of Child Nutrition Programs which includes the management of the NET Program. Such problems in a nutrition program can be categorized as: policy problems, resource problems, organization problems, and long term health issues. Some examples of problems in each of the categories include:

Policy problems

These problems relate to State or local policies such as a competitive foods policy for school districts which prohibits the sale of defined categories of food at specified times of the school day. The sale of non-nutritious foods in competition with school lunches should be addressed through a policy change. Nutrition education and training can help to make students, parents, faculty, and the community aware of the need for a policy change.

Resource problems

Problems in this category relate to the necessity of allocating limited resources. State agencies have to make decisions regarding how to use the human, physical, and fiscal resources available. The allocation of resources is a management issue rather than a problem to be addressed through nutrition education and training. The NET Coordinator is responsible for working within the budgetary constraints of the program and with other members of the State Agency to allocate resources based on the findings of the needs assessment as a basis for the State Plan. It is important to recognize that with limited resources the NET Program probably cannot address all problems which are identified in a needs assessment.

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Organization problems

In the planning of a needs assessment, organization problems may become apparent such as the working relationship between agencies or within an agency. Although these problems can have a significant effect on the goals of the NET Program, the problems cannot be solved through nutrition education and training.

Long term health issues

The NET Program can have a significant influence on the knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors of students as it helps them make informed food choices as part of a healthy lifestyle. *However, needs analysts should be cautious in defining needs assessment objectives and/or program objectives which assume a direct relationship between nutrition education provided through NET and food related knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors. Changes in the food habits of children, like adults, are affected by many variables which cannot be controlled in the school/center setting.*

The NET Coordinator should be aware of these categories of problems and be prepared to address them as appropriate from his/her leadership position in the State Agency.

How to use this Guide

This Guide has been developed as a handbook for the NET Coordinator (needs analyst) who is planning and conducting a needs assessment. Section 2, *"Purpose Of A Needs Assessment,"* builds the case for a needs assessment that is timely, relevant, and authentic as a basis for the State Plan. Section 3, *"Multiple Aspects To Be Addressed In Designing A Needs Assessment,"* provides the needs analyst (the NET Coordinator) a list of important topics to address in the process of designing and conducting a needs assessment. Obtaining data describing the status of these aspects of the NET Program assures the needs analyst that the State needs assessment addresses the 15 areas of needs assessment identified in the NET regulations. After considering the topics to address as described in Section 3, the needs analyst is ready to determine how a needs assessment should be conducted, either within the State Agency or through an external contract. Section 4, *"Considerations To Be Made In Conducting A Needs Assessment Internally Versus Externally,"* leads the needs analyst through the process of determining which approach is most desirable. Section 5, *"Needs Assessment Process,"* describes the generic process of planning and conducting a needs assessment. Section 6, *"Management Of An External Needs Assessment,"* provides guidelines for working with a consultant or contractor outside the State Agency. Section 7 provides a *"Summary"* of the Guide. Section 8, *"References,"* includes the list of references used in preparing the Guide as well as references for additional information on various aspects of the needs assessment process and strategic planning.

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SECTION 2: *Purpose Of A Needs Assessment*

OVERVIEW AND RATIONALE FOR A NET NEEDS ASSESSMENT

As stated in the previous section, the appropriateness of a State Plan is predicated on the comprehensiveness, relevancy, authenticity, and timeliness of the State's needs assessment process. The absence of this component jeopardizes the inherent validity of the State Plan, and needlessly restricts the impact of the Plan's projected outcomes. The needs assessment is the vehicle which keeps a State "on track" in moving toward the accomplishment of a desired future. It provides the data base for the formulation of definitive objectives, for decision-making, and for the outline of strategies and an action plan which will contribute to the *effective* as well as to the *efficient* achievement of those objectives.

Consider as an example a needs assessment which neglects to address the NET regulations relative to the scope of the needs assessment process, or which fails to address the needs of school nutrition managers, or, perhaps, which ignores a growing population of immigrant students and their parents. With those kinds of oversights, it is evident that the needs assessment will not be very comprehensive; thus, the identification of objectives to be accomplished and prioritization of those objectives for the State Plan is compromised by lack of information.

The same type of red flags can be raised relative to the appropriateness of the objectives and action plans included in the State Plan when the data reviewed in the needs assessment process are too general, too broad, or too extraneous to be pertinent to the needs of a given State. Such is often the case when national data sources or statistics are quoted as the sole basis of information, the assumption being that those same conditions and/or trendlines are reflective of the State as well. Questionable data sources also create doubts as to the authenticity or reliability of the data.

Notes

The timeliness of needs assessment data is of critical importance to developing relevant State Plans. Although there is no FNS requirement as to how often a needs assessment for a specific population must be conducted, data collected more than five years in the past may have little relevancy to current or projected conditions. A three-to-five year cycle for needs assessment is recommended. Although some States cannot fund a comprehensive needs assessment every three years, it is recommended that needs assessment data be updated for each population every three years (maximum five years). For example, if a statewide survey was used to define training needs for district school nutrition directors in 1995, the data could be updated in 1998 by using a focus group of selected directors. The focus group can be an inexpensive method which provides useful data. The Appendices include a detailed description of both methods mentioned here.

The qualities described demand that the assessment of need be viewed as an ongoing process. The design and format should reflect a dynamic dimension which encourages continuous improvement and provides unlimited opportunities for inter-agency collaboration.

Desired Qualities Of A Needs Assessment

Comprehensiveness - the scope of the needs assessment process; the extent to which both current and projected needs are examined in relation to the desired future, including an examination of the various factors, conditions, and changes which are projected to impact those needs; and the study of the interrelationships among the various identified segments of needs, including the relationship of the individual segments to the total picture.

Relevancy - the extent to which the data examined are truly pertinent to the needs assessment of the State's NET Program, and the extent to which that relevancy is tied to and reflected in the summative expression of need.

Authenticity - the extent to which the data examined are accurate, reliable, and reflective of actual conditions, including the reliability of the data sources themselves.

Timeliness - the extent to which the data examined are current, and, thus, reflect both actual conditions and projections for the future which are based on the most currently available information.

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The needs assessment process may be viewed as an inherent function critical to the effective management of the NET Program, or it may be seen as a compliance activity required in federal regulations for the development and submission of the State Plan. From either perspective, the needs assessment process is requisite to the functions of planning, program justification and development, as well as that of accountability.

Planning

NET Program regulations require that the State Plan be based on the needs identified from an ongoing needs assessment process (7 CFR Part 227). The requirements of the needs assessment process are identified in Section 227.36 which outlines 15 categories of need to be examined during the assessment process. Each of these 15 categories of need must be addressed during the five-year authorization period. The categories include the examination of need in such targeted populations as:

- Children, teachers, and food service personnel in need of nutrition education and training; and
- Offices or agencies at the State and local levels which have responsibility for preservice and inservice nutrition education and training.

Among the myriad factors to be considered in the assessment process are:

- Existing State or federally funded nutrition education and training programs,
- Relevant State mandates for nutrition education and/or training,
- Materials currently available for nutrition education and training,
- Any major child nutrition related health problems within the State,
- Competency levels of teachers in nutrition education,
- Competency levels of foodservice personnel,
- Problems that various institutions have encountered in obtaining and preparing nutritious meals in an economical manner,
- Problems noted in the dietary habits of children,
- How parents perceive and are involved in the CNP, and
- Coordination problems encountered between teachers and food service personnel.

NOTES

The purpose of this extensive needs assessment process is to determine the difference or gap between "what should be" and "what is." The identification of that difference provides the data base for the subsequent identification of the goals and objectives to be included in the State Plan.

As needs continue to increase and resources available to address those needs remain limited, the need for inter-agency collaboration becomes of critical importance. Elements within the needs assessment process, as noted above, are targeted to examining the services, materials, plans, and data bases of State-level and local providers to establish a basis for strengthening jointly sponsored or coordinated initiatives. When viewed from this perspective, the needs assessment process can be used as a major tool in the planning of networking activities among State and local agencies, thus helping to assure the maximum utilization of resources.

Program justification and development

Reflected within the goals, objectives, and action plans is the identification of new initiatives and thrusts to be developed, along with the designation of those current programs and services which will be continued. To qualify as objective, legitimate requests for new initiatives or program continuation, it is imperative that the data base synthesized from the needs assessment process provide the justification for the proposed plan of activity. The synthesis of the data collected thus becomes of critical importance as a culminating activity within the assessment process, in that it provides the summative basis for "go" or "no go" decisions.

In many instances, however, data collectors become concerned with "appearances," and focus on a State's accomplishments, strong points, and "how well we are doing." With a primary focus on strengths rather than weaknesses or deficiencies in a needs assessment process, little if any, justification can be given to support budget requests for future funds. Instead, the question becomes, "If you are doing so well, why do you need additional funds?"

Reference is frequently made to the expression "analysis paralysis," for indeed, data collectors can easily find themselves inundated with reams of information. In such situations, they often become reluctant to come to closure in their analysis. It is only when the multiple analyses are synthesized that critical patterns, trends, and a holistic perspective of need can be identified, thus providing the basis for the identification of the needs to be addressed in the plan and the justification for the program and services targeted to meet those needs. Personal preferences and opinions, decisions based on historical tradition, or "we've always done it this way" mindsets have little, if any, place in the justification or support of proposed goals and objectives.

Notes

Accountability

To clarify how the needs assessment provides accountability, it is useful to look at a model of the Closed Loop Assessment-Planning-Budgeting-Implementation-Evaluation Process.

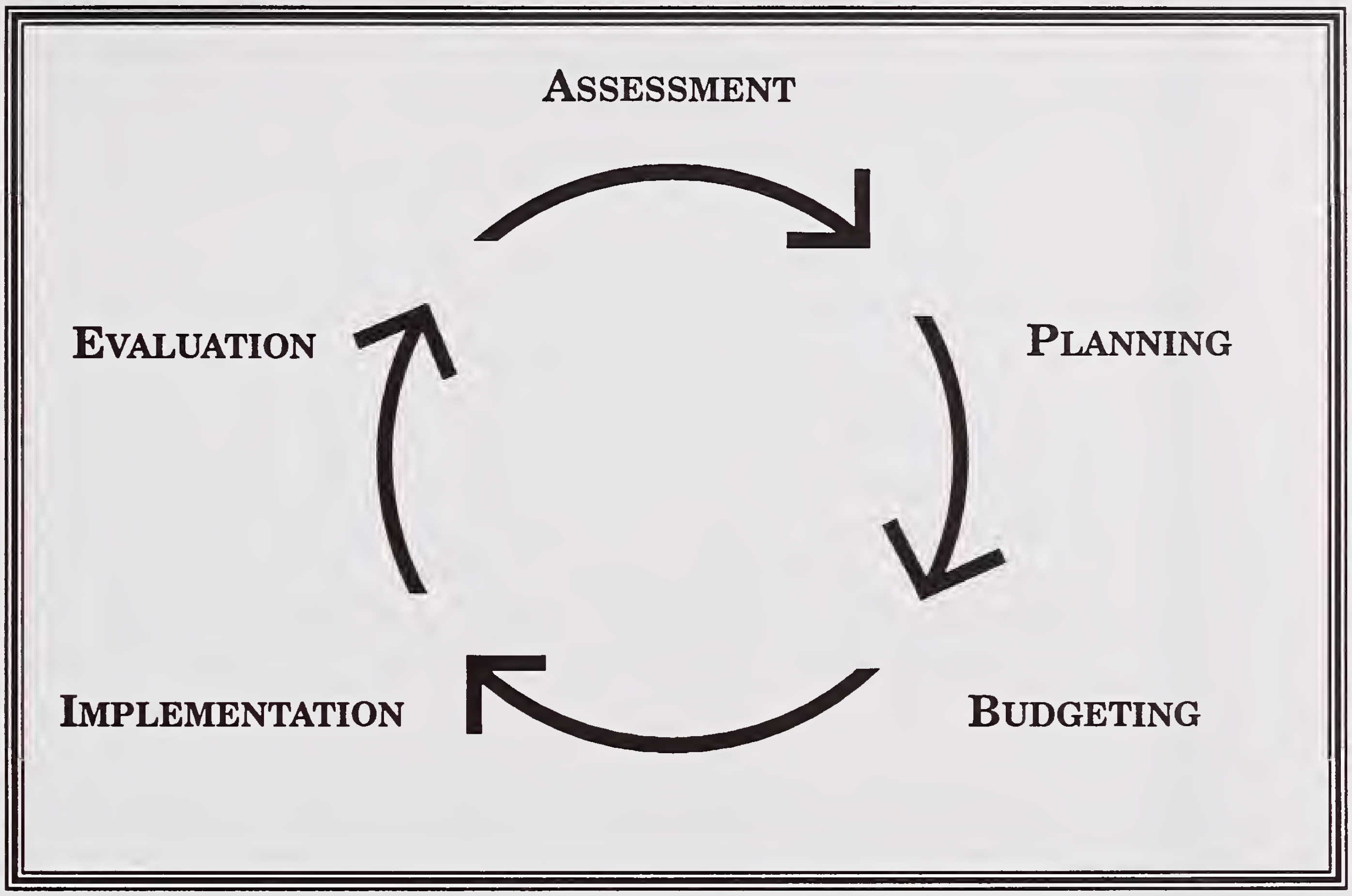

Illustration 1. *Closed Loop Assessment-Planning-Budgeting-Implementation-Evaluation (A-P-B-I-E) Process.*

The needs *assessment* provides the futuristic perspective for the process. As the initiating component, the primary focus of needs assessment is the determination of "where are we now in relation to where we want to go?" "What are our greatest challenges today and what challenges do we project for tomorrow?" "What needs must be addressed if we are to achieve our goals?" "What obstacles must be overcome?" "How will that impact be felt?" "What should be our priorities?" The answers to those questions provide the basis for *planning*, including the identification of specific objectives to be accomplished for a given period of time and the outline of the action plan which will contribute to the achievement of the objectives. Answers also provide the basis for all subsequent resource allocations *(budgeting)* to be made during that timeframe.

Notes

Following *implementation* of the State Plan, the *evaluation* assumes a historical focus by returning to the same questions asked in the needs assessment, "after all our effort, where are we NOW in relation to where we want to go?" "What didn't work and why?" "What impact did we have on addressing our defined needs?" "Were our priorities appropriate relative to our current conditions and to the changes taking place in our State?" The answers to those questions, in turn provide the basis for a re-examination or re-assessment of projected needs. And, thus, the cycle begins anew.

The assessment and evaluation components represent both the initial and final phase of a closed loop assessment-planning-budgeting-implementation-evaluation (A-P-B-I-E) process or cycle. The needs assessment process provides the basis for the determination of goals, objectives, and action plans. Subsequent to that determination, it serves as the basis for budget allocations. Thus, it is the driving force behind all State activity, and provides the basis and framework for the management of a State's program of activity. Given that posture, the needs assessment data base also establishes the yardsticks against which progress toward meeting the identified needs will be measured.

Thus, accountability becomes multi-dimensional within the A-P-B-I-E cycle: accountability for the establishment of goals and objectives, for the support of the budget requests, for the management of the plan's implementation, and for the assessment of outcomes achieved. The basis for such multi-dimensional accountability is the needs assessment data base.

Notes

SUMMARY

The needs assessment provides THE data base for the outline of strategies and action plans to be included in the State Plan for Nutrition Education and Training. As such, it is critical that the needs assessment be viewed as an ongoing process, and include the qualities of comprehensiveness, relevancy, authenticity, and timeliness. The 15 areas of need described in NET regulations must be examined at least every five years in the ongoing needs assessment process. The needs assessment should be viewed as an inherent function critical to the effective management of the NET Program, thus helping to assure the maximum and most effective utilization of resources. Seen from this perspective, the findings from the needs assessment process will provide the primary basis for management decisions in program planning and development, budgeting, and for year-end accountability. Thus, the needs assessment process is identified as a major component in a closed loop assessment-planning-budgeting-implementation-evaluation process or cycle.

Notes

SECTION 3: *Multiple Aspects To Be Addressed In Designing A Needs Assessment*

The NET regulations (7 CFR Part 227.36) describe multiple aspects of a needs assessment. The major topics described in this section are provided to help the needs analyst address the 15 regulatory requirments of the NET needs assesment. The topics are sequenced to assist the needs analyst in viewing the status of NET beginning with the "big picture" and moving to specific areas of nutrition education and training.

FEDERAL REGULATIONS

FNS regulations 7 CFR Part 227 describe the implementation and operation requirements of the NET Program. Section 227.36 of the regulations lists 15 requirements for needs assessment (see Appendix H). These requirements of a needs assessment have been used as a basis to develop the topics in this Section. The needs analyst should review each of the topics and determine how that aspect of the needs assessment will be addressed during the five-year planning cycle for the NET State Plan.

Since needs assessment is an ongoing process, most State Agencies will not conduct a comprehensive needs assessment yearly but will use a cyclical method of examining needs for defined parts of the NET Program on a regular basis. Thus, most State Agencies will design their needs assessment to address some of the multiple aspects discussed in this Section, but not all in one year. The cyclical approach to needs assessment planning is illustrated in Section 5, Master Plan Matrix For A Continuous Process of Needs Assessment, *(page 39).*

NOTES

STATE LAWS, REGULATIONS, MANDATES, AND SPECIAL PROJECTS

In planning for a comprehensive needs assessment, consideration should be given to laws, regulations, policies, and procedures which are in place and which affect how nutrition education and training is developed, provided, and evaluated. The NET targeted populations can be affected by a variety of different mandates. The listing below is intended to help the needs analyst consider the mandates which may be in place within a State and which can have a significant impact on the training needs of teachers and CNP personnel as well as the nutrition education material needs in the classroom.

- **Child care centers participating in the Child and Adult Care Food Program.**

  Licensing requirements for child care centers,
  Licensing requirements for family day care homes,
  Requirements specific to Head Start child care centers,
  Sanitation certification requirements,
  State Agency policies and procedures.

- **Public and private schools, residential child care institutions (RCCIs).**

  Accreditation standards which affect school nutrition programs,
  Certification requirements for school nutrition personnel,
  Certification requirements or staff development requirements for teachers,
  State school board requirements which affect school nutrition programs,
  State Agency policies and procedures.

- **Summer Food Service Program.**

  State school board requirements,
  Sanitation certification requirements,
  State Agency policies and procedures,
  Local government requirements,
  Requirements of the sponsoring agency.

Notes

The following scenario illustrates how a State mandate defines training needs for school nutrition personnel in a State. The State Board of Education has adopted a staff development requirement that requires each school nutrition manager to complete a State-prepared course every three years to maintain State certification and thus employment. The State Agency assumes the major responsibility for providing staff development opportunities for managers to maintain their certification. Thus, the State mandate defines a cycle of training materials development and course implementation for the State Agency. One of the functions of the ongoing needs assessment is to define the training needs of the managers in order to determine the topics to be addressed in the next course development cycle. The State Agency procedures include a three-year cycle of needs assessment to define managers' training needs leading directly to a three-year course development and implementation project to meet the defined needs.

In addition to State mandates, some States may have unique projects which should be considered when planning a needs assessment. An example is the Comprehensive School Health Program awarded to selected States as demonstration projects by the Centers for Diseases Control and Prevention (CDC). The goal of the program is to strengthen the capacity of State Education Agencies to plan, implement, and evaluate effective comprehensive school health programs to prevent important health-risk behaviors among youth. The behaviors listed include dietary patterns that contribute to disease. In the demonstration project States, the State Education Agency and other agencies are working cooperatively to implement the project. The project has important implications for training and materials development for the NET Program in the project States.

The remaining topics in this section have been sequenced to help the needs analyst view the planning of the needs assessment from perspectives of the State's "big picture" problems, specific to targeted populations. The topics are based on the NET regulations.

NOTES

Sources of primary and secondary data which can be used to document the State's nutrition education and training needs

Some of the data required to address the topics described in this Section are already available to the NET Program from other areas of the Child Nutrition Programs, the State Department of Education or Public Health Department, professional organizations, colleges and universities, or sources of national data. The needs analyst is encouraged to investigate potential sources of data to answer the questions before determining that *original data* is needed. The Data Review method for needs assessment is described in the Appendix D.

Social, economic, or technical trends impacting the nutritional health of individuals targeted by the CNP

The Child Nutrition Programs including the NET Program must continually change to meet the nutrition and nutrition education needs of children in schools and child care programs. The needs assessment process defines areas in which the NET Program should respond to societal changes affecting children. Because many of the trends are national, data may already be available. However, to the extent possible, the needs assessment should focus on how trends/forces/changes are affecting children in the State. Shown below are trends and health initiatives which may be considered in planning a needs assessment. Suggestions for sources of data have been provided.

Social Trends:

- Drug abuse in school-age children,
- Teenage pregnancy,
- Latch-key children,
- Single-parent homes,
- Ethnically diverse neighborhoods and families,
- Homeless children,
- Eating disorders,
- Interest in nutrition,
- Sports nutrition,
- Health care reform,
- Implementation of Healthy People 2000.

Sources of State or local data: State Public Health Department, State Education Agency, local public health departments, Extension Service, colleges and universities.

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Economic Trends:

- Unemployment rates,
- Household income (single parent and two-income families),
- Changing State or local economy,
- Competition within the school for the student "food dollar" (i.e. - school operated vending machines and snack bars, sales of non-nutritious snack foods to raise money for the school or student projects).

Sources of State or local data: State Commerce Department, local chambers of commerce, free and reduced price eligibles from school districts, Aid To Families With Dependent Children (AFDC)/Food Stamp eligibility rosters.

Technology Trends:

- Fast food consumption,
- Incidence of meals eaten away from home,
- Vending machines (in schools as competition with the CNP),
- Food supplements,
- Computer technology.

Sources of State or local data: Professional organizations related to food and nutrition (School Food Service Association, Dietetic Association, Professional Chef Association, Restaurant Association, Food Brokers Association, etc.).

Notes

Some current national initiatives which affect the need for nutrition education and training

National initiatives change periodically and the following list includes some of the initiatives current in 1994.

- The Strategic Plan for Nutrition Education: Promoting Healthy Eating Habits For Our Children (1993),
- Implementation of the Dietary Guidelines for Americans in Child Nutrition Programs,
- Providing meals to children with special nutrition needs,
- Health care reform,
- Healthy People 2000,
- Initiatives from national health organizations such as the American Heart Association, American Cancer Society, National Cancer Institute, American School Food Service Association, American Dietetic Association and others,
- American School Food Service Association's (ASFSA) Master Plan for Education. (See Appendix G.)

Notes

NEED FOR NUTRITION EDUCATION AND TRAINING IN TARGET GROUPS

The needs assessment process should define the training needs for teachers and school nutrition/CACFP personnel as well as the nutrition education needs of students. Efforts should be made to obtain available data from other agencies and institutions that will help to delineate needs using minimum NET Program resources. Following are some suggestions for ways to define the need for nutrition education and training for targeted populations.

Number of students reached by the Child Nutrition Programs

The NET Program is the education arm of the Child Nutrition Programs. Therefore, one of the first considerations in defining needs is to look at how well each of the Child Nutrition Programs is fulfilling its goal of providing nutritious meals to students and utilizing the Program as a learning experience. The learning experience provided by having a nutritious lunch or breakfast at the school or center begins with the meal itself. Therefore, examining participation rates in CNP is an important aspect of a needs assessment. Low participation rates in schools can result from a myriad of sources; however, training of school nutrition personnel and nutrition education can have a positive impact on participation.

- Obtain data on the number of schools participating in the:
  - * National School Lunch Program (school districts participating),
  - * School Breakfast Program (school districts and schools participating).
- Examine participation rates by school district for the:
  - * National School Lunch Program, and
  - * School Breakfast Program.

  (Review participation rates by grade level; geographical location in the State; category of paid, free, reduced price meals; and other variables.)
- Obtain data on the participation of eligible residential child care institutions in the National School Lunch Program and School Breakfast Program.
- Determine whether the Summer Food Service Program is offered in all areas of the State. Examine whether the Program is reaching the targeted population of children.
- Obtain data on the participation of eligible child care centers in the CACFP.
- Obtain data on the number of sponsors of Family Day Care Homes and number of homes participating by sponsor. Examine whether the Program is reaching the targeted population of children.

Notes

Type, prevalence, and severity of nutrition-related student health problems in the State

When planning a needs assessment, consideration should be given to using available data in a State to define nutrition-related health problems of the student population. Obtaining original data regarding the nutritional status of students may be beyond the scope of the NET Program in some States. By using the Master Plan approach for needs assessment described in Section 5, most State Agencies can obtain the data necessary to define needs.

Suggestions are provided below for identifying data which can be used to define nutrition education needs for students.

Step 1: *Identify descriptors that reflect nutrition-related health problems of children served by the CNP.*

- Surveys of nutritional status,
- Surveys of food-related behaviors and attitudes,
- Hypertension rates,
- Cholesterol levels,
- Anorexia and bulimia (reports, research),
- Obesity and overweight,
- Teen pregnancy,
- Infant mortality (teen mothers),
- Children with special nutrition needs in schools and centers.

Step 2: *Determine where and with what groups the problems are most prevalent*

- Grouping by age, sex, race, ethnic background;
- Geographical locations.

Step 3: *Identify sources of data to document nutrition-related health problems.*

- Hunger surveys conducted by government agencies or private groups,
- Nutrition monitoring projects,
- State Public Health Agency,
- Local public health departments,
- Extension Service located at the Land Grant University.

Step 4: *Determine what original data should be collected in a NET needs assessment.*

Notes

Problems encountered by schools and institutions (child care centers, day care homes, and residential child care institutions) in planning, procuring, preparing, and serving safe, nutritious food economically and in a manner attractive to students

The needs assessment should attempt to determine problems encountered in schools and centers in the planning, procurement, preparation, service, and marketing of lunches and breakfasts to students. Furthermore, since the Child Nutrition Programs should provide a laboratory for learning good food habits, the assessment should be to determine the success of this effort in the cafeteria, the classroom, and the overall school environment.

By reviewing available data from Child Nutrition Programs (Data Review is described in Appendix D), the needs analyst can begin to determine where problems are encountered. Sources of data available in State Agencies include: monitoring data, State management evaluations, and summaries of technical assistance visits by State staff.

Problems encountered by teachers and CNP personnel in providing and coordinating effective nutrition education activities in the classroom and cafeteria

ASSESS THE STATUS OF NUTRITION EDUCATION IN THE CLASSROOM AND CAFETERIA USING INFORMATION IN THE FOLLOWING AREAS:

- Training of teachers in the area of nutrition education (courses and/or staff development programs),
- Funding for teacher training for courses or staff development,
- Required or optional teacher training (State mandates),
- Required or optional nutrition education in the classroom,
- Resources available for teachers to make learning experiential,
- Support from the district and school administration,
- Working relationship between teachers and Child Nutrition Program personnel , i.e. examine how they work together to use the cafeteria as a learning laboratory to reinforce nutrition learning in the classroom,
- Parental and community support for nutrition education activities,
- Fund raising activities in the school which are consistent/inconsistent with the nutrition philosophy of the CNP,
- Overall nutrition philosophy of the school district/school/center in regard to competitive foods, support for the CNP, and provision of nutritious foods as part of educational activities (classroom parties, field trips, etc.).

Notes

Competency levels of CNP personnel and teachers

One of the primary areas of needs assessment is defining the competency level of practitioners. The traditional approach to determining training needs or problems is to determine the discrepancy between "what is" or actual competency level, and "what should be" or the defined competency. In other words, a needs assessment is a gap analysis. The discrepancies between actual and desired knowledge, skills, and performance are identified. The differences are the training needs. Methods used to define the differences are discussed in Section 5 and the Appendices.

A true training need exists when an employee is not proficient in an important job task. An employee may want training in an area where he/she is not proficient but the job task is not important or may even be irrelevant to the organizational objectives. A well-designed needs assessment instrument delineates true training needs and training wants.

An often-used model for needs assessment, the competency model, is based on a reliable list of competencies for a job. When a reliable list of competencies is available for the population for which training needs are to be determined, the competency model for needs assessment can be used. In this model, personnel are asked to rate themselves on their proficiency for each competency. Training wants are eliminated from the list because it is assumed that all of the competencies are important for job performance. Of course, this method can only be used when a reliable list of competencies has already been developed for a specific job.

When there is no list of competencies for a specific job, the needs analyst must begin the needs assessment process by generating a list of job duties including job tasks and skills necessary to perform the duties as a basis for training need statements. The list of job duties may be developed from several sources: competencies for a similar job, job descriptions, job analyses, and input from experts and practitioners. Using the list, employees are asked to rate themselves on proficiency of each job duty. The summary of the ratings provides a profile of training needs.

The question of how to delineate training needs and wants has been addressed by a number of authors. In a study comparing three needs assessment methods, Misskey et al. (1985) defined felt needs as, "Gaps or deficits the individuals perceive themselves as having; felt needs are self-defined gaps." They defined prescribed needs as, "expert-defined gaps, that is, gaps or deficits relative to an acceptable standard set by experts." Both felt needs and prescribed needs were considered educational needs that could be satisfied, at least partially, by an educational experience.

Notes

Needs may be different from an individual's perspective than when approached from the perspective of a supervisor rating a subordinate. Scissons (1984) suggested that the needs analyst should look for needs assessment methods that obtain varying perspectives of a situation and methods that combine data which may seem contradictory at first glance. Some needs assessment studies which have approached the identification of manager needs from the perspective of managers and their supervisors, have found some differences in school nutrition managers' perception of their training needs and the perceptions of their supervisors regarding the managers' training needs (Robinson, 1987; Sneed, 1993). Needs analysts generally agree that a needs assessment should examine practitioners' needs both from their perspective as well as that of their supervisors and/or experts in the field.

> *The question of who can best determine an individual's needs does not require an either/or answer. The perspectives of both the adult learner and others can help identify the gap. Individuals often have a wealth of information and understanding concerning their needs. Because learning is essentially an internal process, only learners themselves can, in the end, decide to learn and to act upon their learnings.* (Monette, 1977, p. 121)

The design of a needs assessment for defining the competency level of practitioners is enhanced when the model includes assessment by the practitioner of his/her own competency level as well as assessment by the practitioner's supervisor or other experts in the field. This kind of model provides a comprehensive view of competency levels since it includes the learner's perceived levels of competency (felt needs) as well as the perceptions of experts regarding the learners' competency levels (expert-defined needs for the learner).

Notes

The first step in defining the competency level of practitioners is to obtain or develop a list of competency statements or job duties. The statements/job duties can then be used to develop training need statements. The following information is provided for the needs analyst as a beginning point for deriving the list of need statements.

- *District-level School Nutrition Directors*

  Competency lists are available from the National Food Service Management Institute (NFSMI) and the American School Food Service Association (ASFSA). See Section 8, "References."

- *School Nutrition Managers*

  Competency lists are available from the NFSMI and ASFSA. See Section 8, "References."

- *School Nutrition Assistants (food service assistants)*

  A competency list is available from the ASFSA. See Section 8, "References."

- *Child Care Personnel*

  Competencies related to the administration of the Child and Adult Care Food Program in child care and adult care centers have not been identified for sponsors, directors, and center cooks. The NFSMI will identify competencies for these CACFP groups in 1994. Some CNP State Agencies have developed job descriptions and continuing education need statements for jobs in the CACFP.

- *Summer Food Service Programs*

  Competencies specific to the administration of the Summer Food Service Program have not been developed. However, competencies appropriate for the management of the school nutrition program are appropriate for the management of the Summer Food Service Program at the district director, school manager, and food service assistant level.

- *Teachers providing nutrition education in the classroom*

  Delineation of teacher competencies in the area of health and nutrition is necessarily based on the learner objectives defined in a State curriculum or State-defined initiatives such as implementation of the Dietary Guidelines. Therefore, competency statements for teachers must be individualized in each State. Needs assessment for teachers usually addresses both teacher training needs and needs for classroom nutrition education materials. A recently published study by Paula C. Zemel on needs assessment for teachers in the area of nutrition education is listed in Section 8.

Notes

Status of nutrition education

NET needs assessment should include an in-depth look at nutrition education in the classroom and how it is integrated with the CNP in the schools and/or centers. Nutrition education objectives may be derived from:

- A State-developed or State-mandated nutrition curriculum,
- A State initiative such as implementation of the Dietary Guidelines,
- Healthy People 2000: National Health Promotion and Disease Prevention Objectives,
- A State legislative mandate for a wellness (nutrition education) program in the schools,
- The Strategic Plan for Nutrition Education.

The needs assessment should describe the status of nutrition education by addressing the following questions:

- What is the curriculum's instructional design?

  Grades Pre-K and K-8:

  Describe the curriculum that is in place. Does it represent current nutrition knowledge? Are the curriculum units designed to be taught alone or integrated with other subjects? Are the necessary resource materials available to teachers?

  Grades 9-12:

  Describe the curriculum that is in place. Does it represent current nutrition knowledge? At what grade levels and in what subjects are the nutrition units designed to be taught?

- Is there a State nutrition initiative that includes coordination between the Child Nutrition Programs and classrooms?

- What are teachers teaching in the area of nutrition? Is it based on the mandated curriculum; a State initiative; or the interest of the individual teacher, school, or district?

- At what grade levels is nutrition being taught? Is this consistent with the mandated curriculum; a State initiative; or the interest of the individual teacher, school, or district?

NOTES

What do students know about nutrition and how do they use that knowledge?

Section 227.36(a)14 of the NET regulations states, "...The needs assessment shall identify the following as a minimum ...(14) problems in dietary habits of children and areas where nutrition education may assist in positive changes... ." Problems in dietary habits of children can be assessed in a variety of different ways including the following:

* Food-intake recalls;
* Food knowledge and practices questionnaires for children, and/or parents and guardians;
* Plate waste studies and studies of foods refused by students in the cafeteria;
* Assessment of health information from available health records in schools, school districts, public health agencies, or local health departments;
* Clinical examination of children;
* Hunger surveys conducted by government agencies or private groups;
* Nutrition monitoring projects, for example, CDC's Youth Risks Surveys,
* Health statistics (national or State) from non-profit organizations (American Heart Association, American Cancer Society, and others);
* National surveys conducted on children's nutrition knowledge from such groups as the American Dietetic Association and International Food Information Council (IFIC).

The issue of how to assess students' knowledge and food practices has been an area of discussion since the first year of NET funding. In the early years of NET, a number of State Agencies developed comprehensive student surveys designed to determine knowledge of food and nutrition and food practices as reported by students. The development of these surveys was expensive as was the implementation of the statewide surveys.

Fewer States now use NET funds for the development and implementation of statewide student surveys because of the cost of development, implementation, and analysis. With limited funding, NET Coordinators should use valid data from outside sources whenever possible. However, some States have developed effective assessment tools targeted to specific grade levels. Some assessment studies are included in Section 8, "References."

NOTES

Adequacy, relevancy, timeliness, and accessibility of instructional materials

The needs assessment should determine the availability of materials for training the targeted groups and for nutrition education in the classroom and cafeteria. The NET Coordinator should make every effort to identify and review available materials before using limited funds to develop new materials.

SOURCES OF NUTRITION EDUCATION AND TRAINING MATERIALS INCLUDE:

- Food and Nutrition Information Center (FNIC),
- Food and Nutrition Service, USDA,
- Human Nutrition Information Service (HNIS),
- National Food Service Management Institute (NFSMI),
- American School Food Service Association (ASFSA),
- American Dietetic Association (ADA),
- State Cooperative Extension Service,
- Local libraries within a State,
- Commercially developed materials,
- Materials developed by non-profit health organizations,
- Generic training materials available from the American Society for Training and Development and other training organizations or sources,
- General education training materials developed by professional associations in education, for example, the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Assessment of instructional materials should be based on the goals of NET, the instructional objectives of the program for which they were developed, and an objective review of the design. A NET Material Profile Instrument which can be used to evaluate instructional materials is included in the Appendix F.

Notes

STATE AND LOCAL AGENCIES AND ORGANIZATIONS WHICH HAVE RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE NUTRITION EDUCATION AND TRAINING OF NET-TARGETED GROUPS

The needs assessment should assess which other organizations in the State are involved in nutrition education and how NET can develop collaborative structures to maximize all available resources. Even though NET is the education arm of the Child Nutrition Programs, most State Agencies provide nutrition education and training programs to practitioners and customers of the CNP with other funding in addition to the NET Program. To maximize CNP funds in a State, the first and most important collaborative effort is between NET and all other areas of the CNP.

When the NET Coordinator is part of the CNP staff, collaboration with all CNP is simplified; however, when NET is located in another area of the Department of Education or in another State Agency, collaboration becomes more of a challenge. The NET Coordinator who is in another area of the Department of Education or another State Agency is, however, in an advantageous position to network with a large group of educators and health professionals who may not be familiar with the Child Nutrition Programs. The planning of a needs assessment provides an opportunity for the NET Coordinator to work closely with other CNP staff as well as representatives of other agencies and representatives from school districts, schools, and agencies sponsoring CNP.

The process of needs assessment should identify other agencies, programs, and sources of assistance including financial support which can be provided directly or indirectly to the nutrition education and training efforts of the Child Nutrition Programs. Many States have participated in the series of NETPRO (Network For Professionals For Staff Development) workshops provided by the National Food Service Management Institute. The purpose of the workshops is to develop a national network of staff development professionals. Representatives from each participating State are charged with developing a network of staff development professionals in their own State. This model for networking provides the ideal environment for collaboration in the development of a needs assessment to define the status of CNP nutrition education and training in a State.

NOTES

Summary

The design of a needs assessment should address the multiple aspects described in the regulations in order to assess the needs for nutrition education and training of the NET-targeted populations. The status of NET should be examined both from a broad perspective and from close-up to look at specific aspects of the Program. Such a comprehensive approach to needs assessment is beyond the scope of many State NET Programs due to financial and other constraints. A Master Plan approach based on a cyclical needs assessment is suggested in order for a State Agency to address the required aspects in a reasonable period of time. This approach is described in Sections 4 and 5.

Notes

SECTION 4: *Considerations To Be Made In Conducting A Needs Assessment Internally Versus Externally*

ADVANTAGES AND DISADVATAGES OF EACH APPROACH

One of the big questions that must be answered by a State Agency is whether a needs assessment will be conducted internally or externally. Some organizations seem to believe that a needs assessment is not objective unless it is conducted externally (McClelland, 1992). There are advantages to contracting with an outside consultant or organization for a needs assessment.

- *Neutrality* — A contract consultant or organization is generally not affected by the State Agency's culture.
- *Lack of bias* — Outside experts do not begin a project with preconceived ideas about the results of a needs assessment.
- *Focus* — A contractor is paid for the needs assessment and will not be involved in other aspects of the operation of the CNP (or other contracting agency).
- *Expertise* — By contracting for a needs assessment, the State Agency can define the type and level of expertise needed for the needs assessment.

On the other hand, there are disadvantages to using an external consultant or organization for a needs assessment.

- *Cost* — A needs assessment designed and implemented through a contract may cost more than having the work done internally.
- *Control* — The State Agency must be involved in all aspects of the needs assessment process to insure that it meets the requirements. Lack of control of a contractor can cause the State Agency to end up with a product that does not meet its needs or expectations.
- *Administration may resist contracting* — The administration may resist contracting because of lack of information about the potential contractor's expertise, concerns about budget, concerns about external consultants reviewing the CNP operation, time required for the contract procedure, or State policies regarding contracts.

Notes

Considerations in making the decision

In order to make the decision of whether to contract for a needs assessment or conduct the needs assessment using State Agency staff, the following considerations should be examined:

1. *What is the scope of the needs assessment for a given year?*

The NET regulations include 15 different areas which must be addressed as a minimum in a needs assessment (Section 227.36). A comprehensive needs assessment should include all of the areas as discussed in the previous section. A review of Requests For Proposals (RFP) submitted by State Agencies indicated that those few States which choose to implement a comprehensive needs assessment in one year do contract for the work. In most State Agencies, the volume of work required for such a needs assessment precludes it being done by State Agency staff.

Most States complete needs assessments in parts or in a planned cycle. This Master Plan approach to planning a needs assessment cycle is described in detail in Section 5. An example of a cyclical needs assessment is described below:

Year 1 - Assessment of the status of nutrition education in schools (public, private, RCCIs):

Teacher training in nutrition education, adequacy of nutrition education materials for classroom and cafeteria, problems in dietary habits of children where nutrition education may assist in positive changes, coordinating the classroom and cafeteria nutrition education efforts.

Year 2 - Assessment of the training needs of school nutrition personnel (public, private, and RCCIs):

District directors/supervisors, school managers, and food service assistants.

Year 3 - Assessment of the training needs of personnel involved in the CACFP and status of nutrition education:

Child care center sponsors/directors, center cooks, family day care home sponsors, family day care home providers, and also problems in the dietary habits of children in child care and where nutrition education may assist in positive changes. This year of the cycle would also address the Summer Food Service Program.

Notes

This example is provided as an illustration; however, there are many different ways to define a needs assessment cycle. If a needs assessment cycle (or Master Plan Matrix model) is used, it is important to maintain the cycle since data become outdated as the programs change, personnel change, and the environment in which the CNP operates changes.

Another example of the Master Plan approach to needs assessment is to conduct the parts of the needs assessment which must be done by an external consultant or a contractor on a periodic basis, possibly every three years, and the aspects of needs assessment that can be conducted by State staff the other years. For example, statewide surveys to assess competency of CNP personnel and/or teachers may be done externally. Gathering data on dietary habits of children, nutritional problems of children, and materials needs may be done by State staff using available resources from a variety of agencies and groups in the State.

2. ***How much staff is available with time and competency level to do the job?***

The needs assessment is one important part of the NET Program; however, it is only one part. A State Agency must determine how to obtain the necessary information in order to define needs in the most cost effective manner. Setting up a cyclical needs assessment is one way to limit the time and cost of needs assessment while still maintaining current information. Section 5 describes a systematic process for conducting a needs assessment internally. A review of the process will help the planner determine whether adequate staff time is available. Staff time for the conduct of needs assessment is affected by:

- Objectives of the needs assessment,
- Data collection method(s),
- Data analysis method(s),
- Type of needs assessment report needed,
- Competency of the staff member(s),
- Availability of support from other State Agencies e.g. data analysis by the State Management Information Systems department.

Notes

The design, implementation, and analysis of a needs assessment involves expertise in several different areas. The NET Coordinator and other staff members who are involved in planning a needs assessment may want to use the references listed in this Guide and other resources to review:

- Group facilitation skills needed to work with an advisory committee or task force (if the State chooses to use a task force for planning the needs assessment),
- Sampling techniques,
- Data collection strategies (design of surveys, interviews, focus groups, etc.),
- Data analysis (descriptive statistics and inferential statistics),
- Report writing.

In most needs assessments, data analysis requires the use of computer software to analyze the data. The Statistical Package For The Social Sciences (SPSS), version 4.0 as revised in 1991, is available for personal computers and mainframe computers. Most colleges and universities use SPSS and it is available in many State Departments of Education. The SAS System, an integrated system of software providing control over data management, analysis, and presentation, is another software package which can be used for analysis and presentation of needs assessment data.

3. Does the administration want the needs assessment done within the State Agency or by an outside contractor (consultant or organization)?

The needs analyst should provide the administrator with adequate information to make a decision on whether the needs assessment should be conducted internally or externally. It is important to keep the needs assessment in perspective to the NET and CNP as a whole program. A well-designed needs assessment provides the needed information for NET planning but also should provide valuable information to the CNP as a whole. Since most States fund some training and materials development from sources other than NET, the needs assessment should be viewed from the standpoint of the whole CNP. NET funds are maximized when NET is viewed as part of the CNP, not as a separate program.

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In minimum-funded States, the cost of a comprehensive needs assessment relative to the total NET Program may preclude such a needs assessment in a given year. A several-year cycle with the needs assessment implemented in segments i.e. the Master Plan, seems particularly advantageous when funds are limited. The Master Plan Matrix described in Section 5 is a practical, cyclical approach to needs assessment.

4. *If the needs assessment is to be contracted, what types of contracts are available to a State Agency?*

When the State Agency decides to contract for a needs assessment several steps should be taken.

STEP 1: Obtain information from the umbrella agency regarding State contracting requirements.

STEP 2: Contact the USDA-FNS Regional Office for guidelines on contract requirements for the Nutrition Education and Training Program.

STEP 3: Determine whether the contract will be based on proposals (bids) or contracted sole-source. That decision will be affected by USDA-FNS and State contracting guidelines.

Section 6 describes the process for developing a Request for Proposals (RFP) and managing an external contract.

Notes

SUMMARY

Determining whether to contract for a needs assessment to be conducted externally or to plan and conduct it internally is an important aspect of the role of the NET Coordinator. Although the final decision must involve other people in the agency, the NET Coordinator should obtain the information necessary to make a valid decision and present it to the others involved. The decision will be affected by the scope of the needs assessment, staff time available and staff expertise, as well as how the NET Program is administered in a particular State.

NOTES

Section 5: *Needs Assessment Process*

Introduction

The approach and mindset of the needs analyst, reflected in the needs assessment process will, to a significant extent, determine the degree of effectiveness achieved. If approached as a federal compliance activity, the mindset is typically that of "let's just get the job done." "Make it easy on yourself; just do what you've done in the past. After all, the State Plan was approved, wasn't it?"

Given this approach, little more than a minimum look at traditional needs will be taken, and with a minimum data base, the vast majority of objectives and program activities proposed for the following year will, in all probability, be continuation activities. Perhaps an in-service program might be offered in a few different sites around the State, or a program might be split into two half-day sessions rather than conducted as a one-day session, or perhaps, a new workshop leader will be hired to conduct an annually held seminar. But as the expression goes, the proposed program of activity will essentially amount to the "20th verse of the same old song!"

The other extreme can also be found, however. A needs assessment process can be established which is so complex, so extensive, and so cumbersome in the design that its weight stifles the creativity of the individuals involved. Further, given the timelines in any State Agency, an overly burdensome process can outweigh the value of the results. When an inordinate amount of time is spent on the needs assessment process, significantly less time is then available to devote to the planning process in which initiatives can be designed to meet the needs identified. The expression, "the tail is wagging the dog" might be an appropriate metaphor for this extreme!

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Extremes in approach can also be found in relation to the degree of sophistication utilized in the assessment design. On the one hand, a very informal approach might be taken in which a few monitoring reports are reviewed, a couple of "strategic" telephone calls placed, and a discussion held with other State staff members with the results hastily compiled into a three-page narrative. The opposite extreme might find a doctoral candidate meticulously scrutinizing the design of every aspect of a given technique, disallowing the review of certain data sources if they weren't "scientifically correct," and calling for an array of statistical treatments of the data to determine the significance of the findings. This continuum of sophistication in a needs assessment process is reflected in the illustration below.

X____**X**

The cowboy: **"Shoots from the hip!"**	**The professor:** **"Savors the test tube!"**

ILLUSTRATION 2. *Continuum of sophistication in a needs assessment process.*

The overall purpose of the needs assessment process must be kept clearly in mind to avoid these types of extremes: **to obtain data which can be used for making effective management decisions regarding nutrition education and training.** As reviewed previously, management decisions must be made regarding planning goals, objectives, programs of activity, and resource allocations. But those decisions must be made in an expeditious manner, based on the best data available at the time of the decision. Thus, the overall purpose of the needs assessment must be sharply defined and maintained as a salient focus throughout the assessment process.

NOTES

Preliminary organization

Prior to identifying and organizing the human, fiscal, and physical resources which will be required in conducting the needs assessment process, preliminary consideration should be given to the organization of an advisory committee, council, or task force to help guide the design and conduct of the assessment. A task force is not a requirement of NET; however, the involvement of such a group will enhance the needs assessment process by increasing the credibility of the findings, developing ownership in the process and NET itself, and providing the needs analyst with valuable input from representatives of the target groups and experts in the field.

If the State Agency decides to involve a task force in the needs assessment process, representatives from various consumer groups concerned with nutrition education and training, including representatives of all target CNP groups should be included in the membership of the committee. States which have an ongoing advisory committee for the Child Nutrition Programs or a NETPRO Committee probably already have representative membership which could provide guidance in the needs assessment process. The size of the Needs Assessment Task Force might range from 15-20 people. This size provides for the formation of sub-committees to address specific needs assessment designs or to obtain special technical assistance. A membership larger than twenty members often becomes unwieldy and difficult to coordinate. The members need to be oriented to the Child Nutrition Program, the NET Program, and the needs assessment process.

Develop a Master Plan

For the past several sections, a review has been made of the array of topics and target groups which should be examined in the assessment process. Needless to say, the same degree of extensiveness cannot be given effectively to each topic and to each target group every year. Decisions must be made, and assessment designs must be formulated which are manageable. That is one of the major reasons why needs assessment must be viewed as an on-going, continuous process, as different emphases can be taken in different years to identify and assess the broad spectrum of need which exists in every State. In Section 3, "Multiple Aspects To Be Addressed In Designing A Needs Assessment," it was suggested that a cyclical method be used to examine the numerous areas of needs as identified in the federal regulations. In reviewing the factors to be considered in electing to conduct an internal assessment versus contracting with an outside consultant, the question was raised of identifying the scope of the needs assessment for a given year. Again, it was suggested that a planned cycle be established wherein different

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questions or aspects of need could be examined periodically on a continuing basis. An example was given for a three-year needs assessment cycle for different types of training needs.

Thus, it is critical that the Needs Assessment Task Force, together with the State NET Coordinator, develop a Master Plan for the needs assessment process, together with the identification of specific objectives to be accomplished within an annual time frame. The Master Plan might take the form of the three-dimensional matrix to depict a three-to-five year period of time and include the following dimensions:

(1) target group,

(2) problem area or data item(s) to be examined, and

(3) timeline by year.

Master Plan Matrix

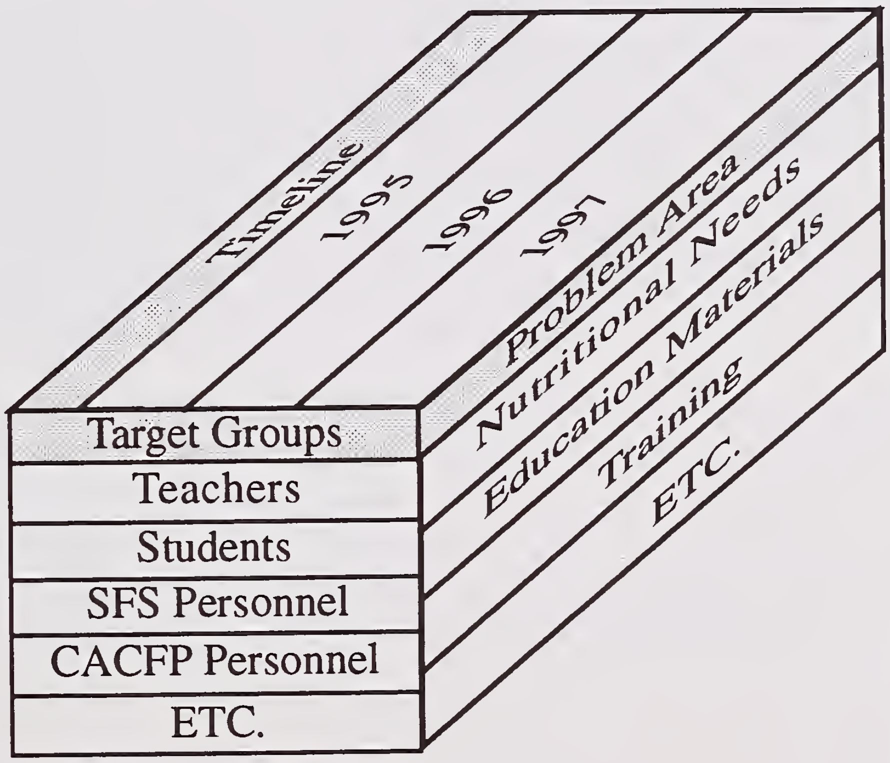

Illustration 3. *Master Plan Matrix For A Continuous Process of Needs Assessment.*

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For example, during the first year the problem area "training" might be approached as an assessment of the nutrition education and training needs of teachers. The second year "training" might be approached as an assessment of the training needs of district school nutrition directors and managers. The third year "training" assessment could address personnel working in the CACFP.

The development of such a matrix approach to assessment design should not be viewed as a "one-time" function, however. Rather, the matrix should be reviewed on an annual basis and modified where needed by the State Agency and the task force. Like the overall needs assessment process, the matrix should be evolutionary in its design to accommodate the ever-changing needs of the constituencies to be served.

Define criteria to prioritize needs

The completion of the Master Plan Matrix For A Continuous Process of Needs Assessment serves to generate ideas relative to the types of topics, issues, trends, problem areas, and target groups which should be addressed in a comprehensive needs assessment system. Also, it helps to broaden one's perception or awareness of the existing need for nutrition education and training. At the same time, however, the completed matrix can reflect a somewhat overwhelming picture of the needs to be addressed. To allay the concern of being overwhelmed, it is helpful to develop a system for prioritizing need in an objective manner. For example, some needs analysts may elect to assess the need for the revision or development of instructional materials for secondary school teachers or students, while others may want to focus their attention on the development of a new training program for school nutrition managers. How do you choose which of the 15 areas of need included in the NET regulations should be assessed during the first year, second year, third year, or later? Which areas of need should be viewed as priorities?

One approach to this dilemma is the identification of evaluative criteria, along with a weighted index system to help the NET Coordinator and/or Needs Assessment Task Force prioritize needs on an objective basis. Criteria which help to define importance, scope, and/or size are identified with weights assigned to each criterion. The system is then used to determine the priority ranking of each potential need area.

Notes

For example, such criteria as the following might be used:

A. Numbers of people involved or size of the population(s) being impacted;
B. The criticality of the problem in terms of safety, legal, life and death, or health issues;
C. The degree to which the problem has the potential of being addressed;
D. The complexity of the problem, e.g. the degree to which numerous factors are impacting on the problem and the degree to which numerous factors may be impacted if the problem were successfully addressed;
E. The scope and dimension of the resources required to address the issue, especially human and fiscal resources.

Other criteria may be pre-determined by the State Agency or task force as well. Once the criteria have been identified, the State Agency may then elect to assign a weight to each item. In the example, Criterion A could be assigned a weight of 5, while Criterion E could be given a weight of 3. The weight assigned to each criterion must be different if a weighted index system is to be used effectively. A sliding scale within each weight can also be assigned. For example, under Criterion E, if the size and scope of resources required to conduct a needs assessment of a given dimension is relatively limited, it might be given a weight of 1; if moderate size and scope, a weight of 2; and if quite extensive, a weight of 3. Each identified need would then be assessed against these predetermined criteria and weights to determine its priority ranking.

The use of such a weighted index system can also help the NET Coordinator or task force establish the timeline component of the assessment matrix itself. For example, if some needs are identified as having first priority, they might be assessed during the first year of the needs assessment cycle, while other needs identified with a lower priority might be assessed during the third year of the cycle.

Notes

Another use of the weighted index system is in determining which needs should be addressed via training on a priority basis after the needs assessment has been completed. For example, a State may have elected to assess the training needs of school nutrition managers as well as child care center directors (administering the CACFP). Once the assessment was completed, however, the needs may have been so great in both areas that a choice had to be made to focus on only one of the target groups. The use of such a weighted system in a second or follow-up round of evaluation may help to establish the subsequent use of the State's resources on an objective, priority basis.

It is critical that the criteria, including their weights be determined prior to any attempt to prioritize need. The development of such a weighted index system will enable the task force, State Agency, or the NET Coordinator to prioritize need as objectively as possible.

IDENTIFY SPECIFIC OBJECTIVES FOR THE NEEDS ASSESSMENT

One of the most important tasks to be performed in the design of a given needs assessment plan is the specification of objectives to be achieved for each cell within the assessment matrix or for each individual assessment. Objectives give focus and clarity to a given assessment design and enable the committee to identify the type(s) of data which would need to be collected to address that specific objective. Rather than taking a "shotgun approach" to data collection, a "laser beam approach" can be designed.

Objectives are typically stated in one of two formats:

(1) as a question, which probably provides the greatest degree of clarity; or

(2) as a traditional objective.

Examples are shown below.

EXAMPLE 1	*Question:*	What are the training needs of school nutrition managers?
	Traditional:	To determine the training needs of school nutrition managers.
EXAMPLE 2	*Question:*	What differences, if any, can be found in the nutrition-related health problems of high school students involved in school-sponsored sports as compared with students who are not involved in sports?
	Traditional:	To determine what differences, if any, can be found in the nutrition-related health problems of high school students involved in school-sponsored sports as compared with students who are not involved in sports.

Notes

Subset objectives might then be identified which would address the same difference but with the added dimensions. Added dimensions for Example 1 could include grade levels in the school, type of food production, educational level, formal training, etc. Added dimensions for Example 2 could include age, race, sex, and geographical area of the State.

A third format of "hypothesis statement" might also be used to identify objectives. The statement might be presented as a positive or negative (null) hypothesis. For example:

Example There are no differences between the nutrition-related health problems of high school students involved in school-sponsored sports and high school students who are not and have not been involved in school-sponsored sports.

This format, however, can often tilt the scales to the sophisticated dissertation research design. In this type of design, the objective is to support or reject the hypothesis based on an extensive statistical treatment of the data. The classical, empirical research design, especially in the social science areas, has come under criticism in recent years. That debate will not be reviewed here. Suffice it to say that a clear focus must be maintained on the overall purpose of the needs assessment: *to obtain data which can be used to make management decisions.*

Although less formal assessment designs may be conducted internally, consideration might be given to contracting with outside consultants or with university personnel for such studies. If representatives from a university are included on the task force, and/or work closely with the NET Coordinator in various capacities, this type of research design might be assigned to a graduate student. Furthermore, the Master Plan Matrix can provide a wealth of ideas for dissertation topics. If the assessment is to be conducted internally, however, it is suggested that a less structured or formalized approach be taken, and that one of the previous two formats be used to identify assessment objectives.

NOTES

SELECT AN APPROPRIATE DATA COLLECTION METHOD

As outlined previously, the identification of specific objectives to be achieved for a given assessment will help to pinpoint the types of data indicators to be collected to address each objective. To pursue the example about high school students involved in sports given earlier, the data to be collected would target nutrition-related health problems of high school students involved in school sports and students who are not involved in school sports. If the subset objectives were added, data would be collected from athletes and non-athletes of different sexes, races, ages, and from those who live in different sections of the State. Such problems as overweight, underweight, cholesterol levels, hypertension, anorexia and, bulimia might be examined by population group.

Data indicators should be identified for each objective with the following considerations in mind:

1. Is the given indicator meaningful and relevant to the assessment objective?
2. Are the data available (e.g. can the data items be found in the examination of current reports and/or data banks at the public health department or other health related agencies)?
3. If the data are not readily available, what will be the investment in time, staff, and cost to obtain the data? Will its value justify the cost?
4. Are indicators observable and measurable?

The criteria of observability and measurability are characteristic of the classical research paradigm. Contemporary research designs provide balance in the examination of both quantitative and qualitative descriptors.

After both the specific objectives to be addressed and the data to be collected have been identified, attention should then be given to the selection of the data collection technique(s) to be used. Like the old expression, "form follows function," the form of the data collection must be determined after the function or objectives and data indicators have been identified. Although numerous techniques and research designs can be used, there are five techniques used most frequently in needs assessment studies: (1) written surveys, (2) interviews, (3) observations, (4) data reviews, and (5) focus groups. A detailed description of each of these techniques is included in the Appendices. The needs analyst is encouraged to review each technique before deciding which is most appropriate for the needs assessment objective and within the limitations of the program.

Notes

DEVELOP A MANAGEMENT PLAN FOR CONDUCTING THE NEEDS ASSESSMENT

Having identified the specific objectives to be achieved and identified the data collection techniques(s) appropriate for addressing the objectives, it is critical that a management plan be developed for conducting the needs assessment. This should include the identification of:

- the activities/tasks that must be performed to achieve the objective, utilizing the data collection technique(s) selected;
- the personnel (staff, task force, and/or outside consultants) assignments to be made for conducting the specific activities or tasks;
- the time frames for completing the activities or tasks;
- the fiscal resources needed to achieve the objectives.

Identification of activities/tasks

This involves the identification of the major activities and/or tasks which must be performed to achieve an identified objective and/or to implement the data collection technique(s). The NET Coordinator, together with the task force may want to brainstorm the "laundry list" of tasks to be completed. For example, if the decision was made to use a written survey, then several major areas of activity may be identified such as:

- identification of the mailing list,
- development of the survey instrument,
- field testing the survey instrument,
- development of the cover letter and other enclosures,
- preparation for mailing,
- follow-up of non respondents,
- tabulation of data,
- development of report/presentation of findings.

Each of these major areas of activity would then need to be delineated to outline the tasks or activities which would have to be performed to complete that area of responsibility. This is, in essence, a pre-planning activity as it serves to outline the "big picture" of the total job to be accomplished. It helps to assure that little or nothing will be over looked and left to chance.

NOTES

Identification of personnel assignments

Given an outline of the tasks to be completed, identified within major functional areas of activity, individual personnel assignments can then be determined. If the work is to be completed internally among the staff and task force members, individuals may identify those areas of responsibility in which they are most interested or in which they have the greatest degree of expertise. If one of the overall objectives of the needs assessment project is to help build ownership in the overall NET Program, then widespread participation and involvement should be encouraged. The NET Coordinator will generally serve as the project director with the responsibility of coordinating all task assignments. If the interest or expertise cannot be found within the available personnel, and/or if work or time constraints make it impossible for the available personnel to complete the job, an outside consultant may be identified to complete specific functional areas of activity. The objective here is to "cover the bases" and not "leave it to George!"

Identification of time frames

Given the delineation of tasks to be completed and assignments made to various individuals, time frames can then be established for the completion of each major area of activity, as well as estimated timelines for the completion of individual tasks. Beginning and ending dates may be identified for each major activity, or just completion dates may be established. If the deadline for the overall needs assessment is established (e.g. the State Plan must be submitted to the USDA-FNS Regional Office by August 15), then the NET Coordinator, together with other staff and task force members will need to work backwards from that date to determine the completion dates for each major component of the project.

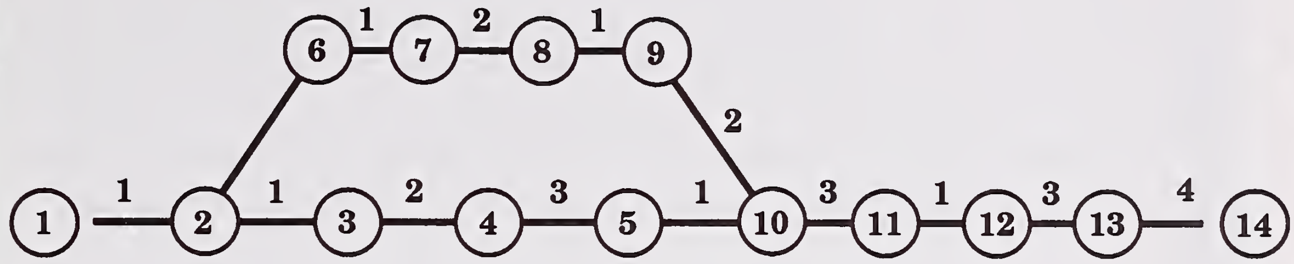
As is often the case, individuals will identify consecutive timelines for the completion of the various activities or tasks. If every task or activity is planned to be performed in a consecutive manner, there will never be enough time to get the job done. Rather, the identification of concurrent timelines becomes of critical importance.

This type of planning is reflected in the management practice referred to as PERT, an acronym for planning, evaluation, and review technique. In its simplest form, it helps a manager or project director:

- Identify those activities which can be performed concurrently,
- Identify those activities which are dependent upon one another for completion and must be performed consecutively,
- Identify the "critical path" of activity (the sequence of activities which will take the longest to complete).

NOTES

PERT Chart



Tasks:

1. Identify objectives.
2. Select data collection method.
3. Develop instrument
4. Field test instrument.
5. Develop cover letter and enclosures.
6. Identify potential participants.
7. Identify representive sample.
8. Secure mailing addresses.
9. Handle preparations for mailing.
10. Mail instrument.
11. Followup non-respondents.
12. Tabulate data.
13. Interpret data.
14. Prepare report.

ILLUSTRATION 4. *Simplified PERT chart for a needs assessment survey.*

Notes

Another management practice which can be of considerable benefit is the use of a Gantt chart. This is another visual device for helping a manager keep a project "on course." In this type of chart, the activities/tasks to be performed are listed down the vertical side of a graph, while weeks, months, or specific dates are identified as intervals along the horizontal axis of the graph. Time frames for the performance and completion of specific tasks are reflected with the use of solid lines under the date shown on the graph. Actual time frames for the performance and completion of the tasks are then depicted directly under the solid line with a broken line.

GANTT CHART

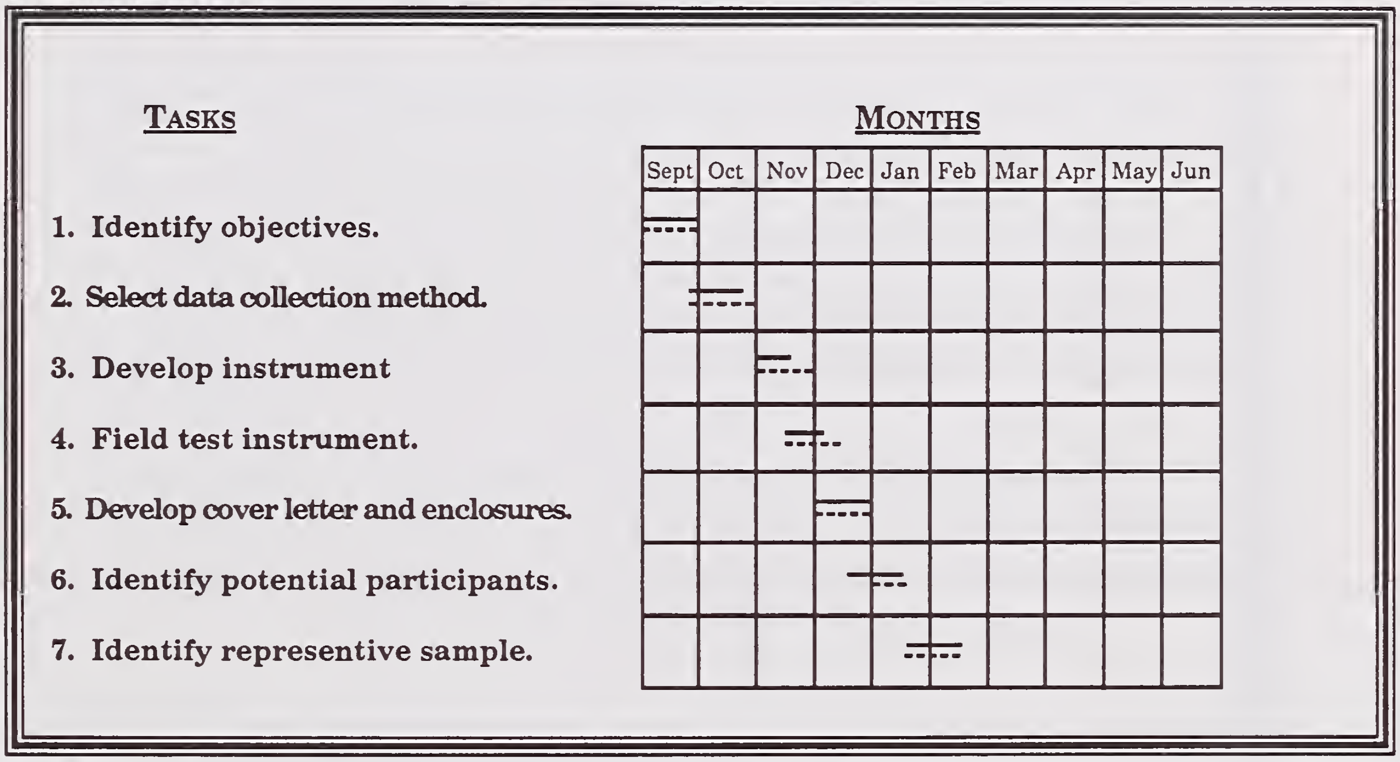


ILLUSTRATION 5. *Sample Gantt chart for a needs assessment survey.*

NOTES

This helps the NET Coordinator see, at a glance, if and where delays are occurring, so adjustments can be made accordingly. In most instances, the final deadline is non-negotiable. Thus, adjustments have to be made to make up the time lost.

Identification of fiscal resource needs

If the objectives of the needs assessment are known, the activities to be performed are detailed, and the responsibilities and timelines identified, all of the factors are present for identifying the fiscal resources which will be needed to complete the overall job. For example, if the technique to be used involves interviews, the identification of the number and location of the interviewers as well as the interviewees should provide the basis for determining travel and associated costs. If the technique involves mail surveys, the number of individuals identified together with the weight of the mailing will determine mailing and associated costs. If the decision is made to have a survey instrument printed professionally, those costs can be determined. The more thorough the job in defining objectives, identifying appropriate data collection techniques, delineating tasks, and identifying staff (or task force) assignments together with timelines, the easier will be the job of identifying the required fiscal resources and establishing budget parameters.

These, then, are the critical components of a management plan which might be reflected on a form similar to that shown below.

NEEDS ASSESSMENT MANAGEMENT PLAN

Objective ______________________________

Data collection technique selected ______________________________

Person responsible ______________________________

Completion date ______________________________

ACTIVITY	TIMELINE	STAFF	BUDGET

ILLUSTRATION 6. *Example of a needs assessment management plan.*

Notes

Synthesize and Interpret the Findings

The data collection techniques have been implemented and the data assembled. How should the data be analyzed? How should the findings be presented? And what kinds of conclusions can be drawn?

Data Analysis.

One of the first steps to be taken is to identify the data which *cannot* be used in the analysis, i.e. incomplete or illegible survey instruments. A decision must be made as to whether to use those items for which the responses are given and are legible, or disregard the total instrument if it is incomplete.

The analysis and treatment of the data is typically of two types: descriptive and inferential. Descriptive treatment is the most common type, and as the name implies, simply describes the data. Inferential treatment, on the other hand, enables the user to make inferences about the data such as statements of cause and effect, and relationships among variables or of samples of larger populations.

Descriptive Analysis

Focusing on the use of descriptive analysis, the major pros and cons might include:

Pros

- ॐ Easy to use,
- ॐ Easy for most readers to understand,
- ॐ Lends itself easily to visual display of the data,
- ॐ Can be presented as means, medians, and modes.

Cons

- ॐ Cannot be used to identify correlations,
- ॐ Cannot be used to make inferences about a large population from a small sample.

Notes

INFERENTIAL TREATMENT OF DATA

Inferential treatment of data may be used if the needs analyst is comfortable with more sophisticated statistics. Some of the more common tests used in inferential statistics are identified in the table below.

Test	Definition	Uses/Examples
t-test	To compare the mean of two groups.	To determine if high school and elementary school nutrition managers differ in their performance on a dependent variable.
ANOVA	To compare the means of more than two groups.	To determine if district CNP directors in small, medium, and large size school districts differ in their performance on a given variable.
Pearson product	Shows whether there is a correlation or relationship between two sets of numbers.	To determine if there is a relationship between recently hired school nutrition managers on a post-test following a given training program and their six-month performance reports.
Phi coefficient	A correlation statistic where both variables are divided into two parts.	To determine the relationship between hiring practices (hired/not hired) and gender (M/F).
Spearman rank	A correlation statistic where the data are ordinal in level and where the data can be placed in rank order. The highest score is ranked "1" and so on.	Useful and appropriate when you have 30 or fewer cases in a sample. Should not be used if there is a large number of tied ranks.

ILLUSTRATION 7. *Common Statistical Tests.*

Adapted from: American Society for Training and Development. (1991). Statistics for HRD Practice. INFO Line. Author. p. 10.

Notes

In choosing the type of analysis to use, consider:

- ॐ The design of the study,
- ॐ The research competency of the needs analyst,
- ॐ The research competency of the reader of the final reports.

Remember, the primary objective is to obtain data which will be helpful in making effective and efficient management decisions.

PRESENT THE FINDINGS

Data may be presented in tables and graphs as well as in narrative format. Graphs may be presented as pie charts, bar graphs, or as line graphs. When used in the presentation of data, they help to:

- ॐ Break long passages of narrative copy, thus providing psychological relief to the reader;
- ॐ Display data in a succinct form, thus providing a quick visual look at summative findings, trend lines, or comparisons.

Tips For Using Graphs

- ॐ **Give a graph a succinct, relevant title.**
- ॐ **Label the sections or axes clearly.**
- ॐ **Use large enough intervals to reflect differences or trends.**
- ॐ **When using bar graphs, make the bars wide enough to see easily.**
- ॐ **When using multiple lines on a line graph, differentiate clearly among the various lines.**
- ॐ **When possible, use color with pie charts.**

Tables may be used to display data entries or responses from an entire group, or to display summative findings. Summative tables are commonly found within the text of a report, while tables displaying complete data entries are usually included in the appendix. For example, if a survey was conducted to determine the education and training needs of teachers across the State, a table might be designed to reflect means, median, modes, standard deviations and other statistics for every sub-group, in every part of the State, for each question included on the survey.

Notes

Although this type of analysis is necessary to determine the important and the statistically significant findings, it is probably much too extensive to include in the body of the text. Shorter, more summative displays of only the significant and important finds are typically more appropriate for the body of the text.

Narratives can be used to support graphs and tables by clarifying or pointing out specific findings, or they may be used in lieu of tables and graphs. If, however, a graph is dependent upon further narrative for an accurate interpretation, the graph needs to be modified. A Johari Window model is another alternative for displaying data when comparative analyses are to be made. This presentation allows the reader to review the findings from multiple perspectives. An explanation of the use of this model for needs analyses is included in the A. E. Robinson reference in Section 8.

Draw conclusions

Conclusions are deductions or propositions which can be drawn from one or more premises based on the data collected. Valid conclusions can only be drawn from definitive data. If the data do not support a conclusion which the needs analyst may want to make because of a personal bias, a conclusion cannot be presented as such. If management decisions are to be made on the basis of the conclusions identified in the report, it is important that the conclusions be logically and accurately drawn from the data analysis.

At the same time, it is important to note the difference between *statistical significance* and *importance*. Statistical significance is not the same thing as importance. Thus, when a study comes to the conclusion that "there were no significant differences" between a control group and an experimental group, for example, it doesn't mean that there is an absence of important findings within the study. What is critical, however, is that the needs analyst or the report developer differentiate between the two. Suppose the needs analyst has surveyed the differences between the training needs of school nutrition managers in the rural and urban areas, as well as between managers in different types of schools, e. g. elementary, middle, high schools. No statistically significant differences were found. That in itself is an important finding. Too often, if findings are just presented as having no statistically significant differences, the reader will gloss over the results. If they are presented as being important, however, the reader will take note.

Notes

Summary

When conducting a needs assessment, it is critical that the following steps or components be addressed: identification of specific objectives to be achieved; selection of data collection technique(s) to be used; development of a comprehensive management plan to direct and implement the needs assessment process, synthesis, and interpretation of findings; and preparation of the final report in which the findings will be presented.

To achieve the highest degree of effectiveness however, it is important that a broad perspective be taken in the identification of the needs to be addressed, and that a carefully defined system be developed for prioritizing the needs in an objective manner. This system can then be used to help delineate nutrition education and training needs within an assessment matrix or Master Plan, thus providing a vehicle for the continuous updating of identified, priority needs.

Notes

CHECKLIST

COMPLETED

- Examine the mindset reflected by the staff in approaching the needs assessment. ☐
- Determine the approach and/or degree of sophistication to be taken in the needs assessment process. ☐
- Address the preliminary organizational needs, including the appointment and use of a task force if found to be appropriate. (The task force is not a requirement of NET, but is a recommendation for the needs assessment process.) ☐
- Develop a Master Plan approach to needs assessment,including the outline of a needs assessment matrix to help address a comprehensive review of needs and to identify extended timelines or cycles for addressing specific target/problem areas. ☐
- Develop an objective system for prioritizing needs. ☐
- Identify the specific objectives to be achieved and/or scope of a given needs assessment project. ☐
- Select an appropriate data collection method(s) to achieve the identified objectives. ☐
- Develop a management plan for conducting the needs assessment. ☐
- Synthesize and interpret the findings. ☐
- Prepare the final report including an appropriate display of the findings and an identification of the conclusions. ☐

Notes

SECTION 6: *Management Of An External Needs Assessment*

INTRODUCTION

Assume the Master Plan Assessment Matrix for the needs assessment has been developed. An array of areas to assess has been identified. A weighted index system has been used to establish priorities, and the most pressing priority areas for assessment require more time or a different type of expertise than is available from within the State Agency. What then? Should an outside consultant be contracted for the work? If so, how do you obtain the most qualified individual, and what responsibilities has the State Agency in monitoring the work of the outside consultant to assure that a quality product is completed on time?

DEVELOP THE REQUEST FOR PROPOSALS (RFP)

The RFP is a legally prepared, written invitation released to selected publics to submit a proposal for a specific project. The RFP delineates project parameters, procedures, and criteria. The format for a RFP can range from being quite broad, allowing the potential contractor considerable latitude in the design and conduct of the project, or quite narrow being very prescriptive in the outline of the project design. The pros and cons of these two approaches are summarized as follows:

Broad approach

- Provides an opportunity to utilize the creative talents of the outside consultant,
- Provides an opportunity to modify the project design, by mutual consent, without having to go back through the legal channels of a State Agency for approval,
- Could be difficult to control or monitor if the consultant turned out to be a good proposal writer, but a weak project director.

Narrow approach

- Enables the State Agency to specify the exact dimensions of the project, including its design, how it will be conducted, and the timelines for completion,
- Allows for the greatest degree of control, thus helping to assure (as much as possible) that a quality product will be delivered within the specification(s) outlined,
- Does not allow for easy modification when the need arises, and may restrict the potential for exploring innovative approaches or dimensions.

NOTES

Specify the objectives, scope, or purpose of the needs assessment

Be clear and succinct in identifying the objectives, scope, or purpose of the specific needs assessment project. From a review of the previous sections of this Guide, it is evident that the scope of a comprehensive needs assessment process is, in itself, quite extensive. Thus, delineations must be made in outlining the parameters for a given proposal or project. The Master Plan Matrix should serve as a valuable tool in this regard.

Specify requirements to be included in the proposal

Identify the components you want the proposing consultant to include in his/her contract proposal. This may include such items as:

- Further delineation of the objectives;
- Identification of the data collection technique(s) or methodology to be used;
- Specific procedures to be followed in implementing the data collection technique(s) or proposed methodology;
- Required minimum sample size and stratification of the sample;
- Standards, criteria, and/or treatment to be used in analyzing the data;
- Description of the proposing consultant's background experience and qualifications, together with any adjunct staff the consultant may use;
- Responsibilities of each person working on the contract;
- Estimated timelines for the completion of each phase of the project;
- Estimated budget costs for each phase of the project.

As mentioned previously, the RFP can be quite broad or quite prescriptive in its design. At some point, however, each of the components identified above will have to be addressed. The question is when. They should be part of the RFP and contract itself, or part of the subsequent deliberations and agreements with the consultant after the consultant has been selected.

Notes

Limitations or restrictions

These can be used as further safeguards for the contracting agency, and therefore, should be defined with care. Three categories of limitations or restrictions are commonly found: budget, timelines, and legal.

Budget limitations/restrictions may:

- State maximum amount for overall contract, i.e. "cost shall not exceed";
- Require consultant to delineate budget by major budget categories, e.g. consultant fees, travel, communication, materials, and supplies;
- Deny or provide access to the use of State equipment and facilities; if denied, may require consultant to identify type of equipment and services to which he/she has access;
- State what types of costs will be reimbursed, what types of costs will not be reimbursed, and what limitations there may be on certain items, e.g. maximum per diem rates, mileage rates, no reimbursement for entertainment, maximum amount for overhead expense;
- Specify how and when expenses for reimbursement are to be submitted;
- Identify penalties and/or procedures for cost overrides.

Time line limitations/restrictions may:

- Simply identify initiation and final completion dates,
- Require consultant to identify estimated timelines for completion of major phases of the project,
- Identify penalties and/or procedures for delays.

Legal limitations/restrictions may:

- Prohibit subcontracting,
- Prohibit any type of discrimination,
- Require that consulting firm be registered with the State and/or require proof of a business license,
- Require drug-free work environment,
- Identify disclosure and non-disclosure requirements,
- Identify auditing requirements,
- Require the identification of State and federal assurances,
- Identify grounds for forfeiture of contract.

Notes

Many State Agencies have an "office of contracts" which serves as a clearinghouse for outside contracts and grants. Staff personnel in this type of office should be quite helpful in identifying the types of restrictions appropriate for a proposed RFP, and should be able to provide examples of various types of RFPs and contracts which can be used as a helpful guide.

Criteria for review and selection

It is critical that an objective review and selection system be established prior to distributing the RFP. This is required in contracting regulations to preclude the accusation of discrimination or favoritism when the contract is subsequently awarded. A review team of at least three readers should be identified to review and individually rate each proposal received by the State Agency, using established evaluative criteria. The readers should be professionals within the field who have the background and expertise in both the technical subject area as well as in research or project design in order to judge the appropriateness, credibility, and authenticity of the proposals.

Prior to the review of proposals, it is helpful for the team to meet to review and discuss the review process to be followed, as well as to discuss the evaluation form itself. If possible, it would be helpful to have the team evaluate a mock proposal and discuss the comparisons of their ratings.

When the review process begins, an evaluative form should be completed by each reader for each proposal, with the scores totaled among the three or more readers. Upon the identification of the proposal receiving the highest composite score, a joint review should be made by the team of reviewers to determine if they have any questions or concerns, or if any further clarification or negotiation is needed. State Agencies may pre-determine that they will negotiate with organizations/consultants submitting the proposals with the top scores.

NOTES

The evaluative criteria identified should be relevant to the project, and should help to assure the delivery of a quality product. Such criteria as the following might be identified:

- Evidence of understanding of the problem;
- Clarity and appropriateness of goals and objectives;
- Appropriateness of proposed activities/procedures/approach for achieving the objectives;
- Degree to which estimated timelines are realistic;
- Appropriateness of proposed data analysis;
- Qualifications and background of the project personnel;
- Availability of equipment, facilities, services;
- Degree to which budget proposals are realistic, appropriate and demonstrate cost effectiveness.

The criteria, together with the maximum number of points for each criterion, and an outline of the review process should be made a part of the RFP.

Monitoring external projects

The same general process of managing the needs assessment as described in Section 5 should be followed in the implementation of the project proposal. For example, the delineation of specific tasks and/or activities requisite for completing the project, along with external timelines, personnel assignments, and budget expenditures is critical - if it has not already been done in the consultant's contract. If the State Agency is not familiar with the consultant's work, the suggested use of PERT and/or Gantt charts may be appropriate to help assure the timely completion of the contract. Although the design and implementation of a management plan is the responsibility of the consultant, it must be approved by the NET Coordinator or project manager who also assumes ultimate responsibility for the conduct of the project itself.

Since the project is being conducted externally, it will require the designation of a staff member to serve as the project monitor. Furthermore, it will require an understanding of the appropriate management and/or monitoring style which should be used. Probably the most important factor which will determine the approach to be taken in monitoring external projects is the personal rapport, background experience, and trust level existing between the external consultant and the project monitor. If the consultant's quality of work is well known, and if the consultant has had fairly extensive background experience in working with similar types of projects, the need

NOTES

for "close oversight" is not important. If, however, the consultant has not worked with the agency before and is relatively unknown, closer oversight of the project may be appropriate until the expertise and work performance of the consultant is demonstrated.

As noted previously, if the RFP and, hence, contract is relatively broad, there will be a need for the project monitor and the consultant to work closely together in detailing the specifics of the project. If the consultant is relatively unknown, a close monitoring style may be necessary to assure compatibility in interpretations, as well as appropriateness in design and implementation. If the contract is quite prescriptive, the degree of monitoring required to assure quality should be substantially less. Again, the reputation and personal rapport of the project monitor and the consultant will be the determining factor.

The important thing to keep in mind, however, is that the agency contracted with an individual to do a job; let the contractor do the job. If the monitoring is such that all creativity is stifled, every detail is checked and double-checked, and prior approval is required for every step along the way, it is doubtful that the consultant will submit a future proposal. If the consultant requires that much supervision to perform a quality job, then either the contract should be terminated, or no future proposal should be entertained from that consultant.

The relationship between the project monitor and the consultant is a two-way relationship, requiring shared responsibilities. The consultant is responsible for submitting interim reports and materials for review within the timeframes designated in the contract. The project monitor, on the other hand, has a responsibility to be just as conscientious and expedient in reviewing the materials submitted, and in providing feedback to the consultant. Unnecessary delays in the review of materials and/or reports may be grounds for the consultant to request, if not demand, extensions in project deadlines.

The same type of attentiveness should be noted in processing invoices for payment. Again, there is joint responsibility. The consultant has the responsibility for submitting the invoices and any necessary expense vouchers/receipts in the manner, format, and at the time designated in the contract. The project monitor, on the other hand, has the responsibility of being expeditious in the review of the forms and in submitting the invoices to the controller for payment. To help preclude problems in this area, clearly defined payment schedules should be specified in the contract.

Notes

SUMMARY

If the needs assessment project is to be conducted externally, the NET Coordinator should develop an appropriate RFP together with an evaluative system with criteria for reviewing proposals. The system designed to assess the proposals submitted should be implemented and the one selected should most closely meet the State Agency's needs. The subsequent contract should be monitored by a person on the State staff. Successful completion of the external contract for a needs assessment will require completion of the joint responsibilities of the contractor and the project monitor.

Notes

CHECKLIST	**COMPLETED**
Determine if the project should be conducted externally.	☐
Identify a project monitor on the State Agency staff.	☐
Determine the type, style, and specificity of the RFP to be developed.	☐
Develop the evaluative system and criteria for review of proposals.	☐
Develop the RFP in the manner and style determined to be appropriate: ◆ delineation of objectives/scope of project, ◆ data collection techniques/project methodology, ◆ procedures to be followed, ◆ data analysis, ◆ qualifications, ◆ timelines, ◆ budget, ◆ restrictions/limitations, ◆ deadlines and format for submission, ◆ evaluative criteria and system for review of proposals.	☐
Implement proposal evaluation system.	☐
Develop contract and meet with consultant to identify performance expectations of both parties.	☐
Monitor performance of consultant in fulfilling the contract specifications.	☐
Make appropriate adjustments to the project design and timelines when and if necessary.	☐
Review interim materials expeditiously, and provide adequate feedback so that appropriate modifications can be made by the consultant.	☐
Process invoices and payments expeditiously according to a prescribed payment schedule.	☐

Notes

SECTION 7: *Summary*

This Needs Assessment Guide was intended to provide guidance to State Agencies in the needs assessment process as required by federal regulations. Deliberately broad in scope, it was written from the standpoint of planning and conducting an *ideal* needs assessment. Recognizing budgetary and staff constraints which exist in most States, the actual implementation of the needs assessment process may be somewhat more limited in scope and design than has been presented in this Guide.

The first step to be taken in getting started is to review the regulatory requirements for a needs assessment, together with the Strategic Plan for Nutrition Education, and this Guide. If found to be appropriate, assemble a Needs Assessment Task Force for input into the process. Then develop a Master Plan for assessing the 15 areas of need identified in the federal regulations on a planned, in-depth, cyclical basis. Determine the assessment objectives or major areas to be addressed in a given year's assessment process, and decide whether the needs assessment will be designed and conducted within the State Agency, or by an external consultant.

Determine the type of data indicators to be collected to address the identified objectives or areas, and select the data collection method(s) appropriate to those objectives and data needs. To assure that the assessment is conducted in an effective and timely manner, develop a management plan including the specific tasks or activities which must be performed, along with designated personnel assignments, and estimated timelines for the completion of major tasks. Utilize PERT and Gantt charts to help personnel visualize the outline and major components of the overall project, as well as help them to see the interdependence of their respective roles and the importance of each individual staying on schedule.

Notes

If the needs assessment is to be conducted by an outside consultant, write the RFP in a manner that assures the inclusion of quality control measures, as well as such other safeguards as budget, timelines, and legal limitations or restrictions. Establish a system for reviewing the proposals submitted to assure the selection of the most appropriate proposal and best qualified consultant. Monitor the project in a manner that assures its successful completion, and acknowledge the individual and collective responsibilities of the parties involved in the approved contract.

Finally, synthesize the data collected, and utilize the findings as the basis for the determination of goals, objectives, and action plans; including program justification and development decisions, budgeting, and resource allocation; for outlining interagency collaboration efforts, and ultimately, for accountability purposes. Focus the needs assessment process as the driving force behind all State Agency activity, by centering its findings as the basis and framework for the management of the State's program of activity in nutrition education and training.

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SECTION 8: *References*

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NOTES

APPENDICES

A. Written Surveys
B. Interviews
C. Observations
D. Data Reviews
E. Focus Groups
F. Material Profile Instrument
G. Summary of ASFSA Master Plan
H. NET Regulations

Notes

Appendix A: *Written Surveys*

Written surveys or questionnaires can be used to solicit factual information ("How many times did you eat in the cafeteria last week?") or to solicit opinions ("When is the most convenient time of year for you to attend a State-sponsored workshop?").

When To Use

The American Society for Training and Development(ASTD) suggests that surveys be used in the following situations:

- To reach a large or geographically dispersed population in a limited period of time,
- If the data are not available through other more readily available sources,
- If further inquiry or follow-up is needed on data collected through other methods and/or to verify information obtained through other methods.

Advantages

- Surveys can be fairly easily constructed,
- Data can be tabulated quickly,
- No special training is required,
- They can be one of the least expensive techniques used in data collection.

Disadvantages

- The potential of low return rates,
- Nonusable returns, and
- Problems associated with poor design which render the data superficial or meaningless can result in the survey being one of the most expensive and least effective methods.

Formats

Various formats can be used in the design of the mail survey instrument. Some of the most common include:

1. ***Likert Scale*** - respondents are asked to rate their reactions/responses to statements along a numerical scale such as 0-10 with 0 being of no importance and 10 being of greatest importance. If this format is selected, it is suggested that an even numbered scale be used, e.g. 0-4, or 0-6. This precludes the "middle of the roader" or "fence straddler" from zeroing in on a mid-range response for the majority of his/her responses.

Notes

2. ***Semantic Scale*** - respondents are asked to rate their reactions/responses along a graduated scale of descriptive indicators such as that depicted below.

X____X

"ABSOLUTELY; RIGHT ON!" — "NO WAY!"

3. ***Multiple Choice*** - typical responses are identified for each item or question, and the respondent is asked to check or circle the response which is most appropriate for him/her. If this format is selected, be sure to include the option: "Other: (please specify)" and provide adequate space for the respondent to write in his/her reply. Typically four to five multiple choice answers should be provided for each item in addition to the "other" response. Each choice should be legitimate and probable.

4. ***Completion*** - typically the stem of a statement is given, and the respondent is asked to complete the statement in the space provided. This provides the opportunity for the respondent to use his/her own words and to express his/her own thoughts or feelings. If this format is used, care should be taken to assure that the stem of the statement adequately conveys the object or target of the inquiry and is not so nebulous that the reader has to grope for intent.

5. ***Open-ended*** - a question or statement may be given for which the individual has full license to provide whatever type of response, in whatever format, and in whatever length he/she may choose. This type of instrument will typically include a relatively limited number of questions or items. Although the number of items is limited, the tabulation of narrative statements is more time-consuming.

Notes

Tips For Effective Use

1. Before developing the instrument, get a very clear focus as to the objective(s) to be accomplished and the type(s) of data to be collected. This will help to assure that the items included are precise and are targeted to solicit the type(s) of data required.

2. Interview or talk with several people from the population(s) to be surveyed to get a feel for their language, their thoughts, and their expressions. This will be of considerable value in framing individual items in the style, vernacular, and level of vocabulary requisite to being clearly understood.

3. Avoid asking for demographic information or responses to items which you do not intend to use, or which has little or no relevancy to the study. Keep the instrument as short as possible, and avoid placing the respondent in an embarrassing situation, e.g. including annual income levels starting at "less than $20,000" when you are surveying inner city pregnant teenagers.

4. Avoid overlapping intervals in the identification of multiple-choice responses e.g. including age ranges of "from 18-25," "25-35," "35-45," "45 and over."

5. Field-test the instrument with representatives from the populations being surveyed. Field-testing among the advisory committee members or office staff is a meaningless activity. If a considerable number of suggestions for modification of the instrument were offered, conduct a second field-test of the revised instrument with different representatives from the populations to be surveyed. Repeat the process until you develop an acceptable instrument. Remember, a clearly defined, precise, easily understood instrument spells the difference between obtaining results which are meaningful and those which are a waste of time and money.

6. Be sure the directions are clear and precise. Clarify whether the respondent is to circle, check, or underline his/her response. If more than one response can be checked, indicate that option. If the respondent is supposed to identify his/her "top three choices," clarify whether he/she is to simply check three responses, or mark first, second, and third choices. If the instrument is continued on the back side of the paper, indicate "OVER" in large bold letter in the bottom corner of the page.

Notes

7. Have the survey instrument printed in a professional manner on YELLOW high quality paper. Research studies indicate that yellow elicits the greatest number of responses.

8. Include a cover letter on letterhead stationary from the CNP State Director, State Superintendent of Education, or some other official to assure authenticity of the survey. Focus the cover letter on the purpose of the survey, and on how the respondent can be of assistance in ultimately meeting the needs of other people as well as him/herself. Assure the respondent's confidentiality. Provide a self-addressed, stamped envelope together with the instrument. Offer to provide a copy of the results to the respondent upon request. If possible, include some type of favor to acknowledge the respondent's input. For example, merchant coupons or special items might be included.

9. Use large commemorative stamps on the outside envelope rather than regular stamps or postage meter strips. Commemorative stamps are eye-catchers and help to enhance returns.

10. Whenever possible, type the name and address directly on the outside of the envelope rather than using an address label. This suggests "I want your response," rather than giving the appearance of a mass mailing to countless numbers of individuals whose addresses were obtained from a State mailing list. Because of this psychology, this technique helps to enhance returns.

11. Be extremely attentive to the compilation of the mailing list. Take every precaution to assure that the names of the individuals included on the list are actually representatives of the populations to be surveyed, that the names are spelled correctly, and that the addresses, including zip codes, are correct. The list must also include an adequate number of names of individuals from the representative samples of the various populations to be surveyed. At this point, the question of "research sophistication" will arise. Some individuals in the classical research school will suggest that the only way to assure the validity of the survey returns is to obtain the names and addresses of the entire populations so that a bonafide random sample or stratified random sample can be taken. This alternative may, indeed, represent the purest design and provide the most statistically valid and reliable results.

Notes

The reality of limited resources and time frames often necessitates the identification of a compromise approach. For example, State Agencies can furnish the addresses of school districts, district CNP Directors, and may have the names of school nutrition managers within the local districts. But they may not be able to readily furnish the names of teachers. Likewise, if the assessment is targeting students or parents or some other population, the availability of a master list of names is extremely doubtful. That should not deter the assessment, however. Start with the schools, and delineate the target population(s) from that source.

The required size of a representative sample is also a disputable issue. There is no magic formula for determining an appropriate size. For example, national pollsters continue to amaze the public every four years with being able to call a national presidential election before the polls close. It should also be noted that the vast majority of medical research studies are conducted with extremely small sample sizes. The suggestion here is to find an acceptable compromise. A rule of thumb might be 20% of the population for a sample when the population is relatively large. For example, in most States, a sample of 20% of the school nutrition managers in the State is satisfactory for a training needs assessment. Again, however, the size will vary depending upon the sophistication of the sample stratification, among other factors. Contrast the time frame requirements together with the budget and staff resources against the anticipated value of the data, and act accordingly. Keep in mind there has rarely been a study that has produced totally indisputable conclusions!

12. Code the instruments in order to identify non-respondents. Techniques which can be used to code questionnaires include: a number code on the questionnaire, a very small slip of paper with a number code placed in the corner of the return envelope, or a number code written under the stamp of the return envelope. If resources permit, send a second mailing to all non-respondents including a follow-up cover letter, instrument, and self-addressed stamped envelope, within ten days to two weeks after the first mailing. If the budget precludes a complete second mailing, send a reminder postcard to everyone within ten days to two weeks after the first mailing.

Notes

13. Examine the mail delivery schedule carefully and try to mail the instruments at a time when they can be expected to be received by the respondents in the middle of the week - not on Mondays or the weekends. When mailing to school nutrition personnel, teachers, or others working on the school schedule; avoid holidays, especially the period of time between November 15 and early January.

14. If time and resources allow conduct a third mailing after another ten day period following the initial follow-up. If possible, telephone calls to the non-respondents encouraging their return of the survey instrument can also be effective. When school nutrition personnel surveys are distributed through a district director, this method of follow-up is particularly effective and efficient.

Notes

Appendix B: *Interviews*

Interviews can be conducted as personal face-to-face interviews or as telephone interviews. They provide an opportunity for active interchanges of dialogue and information.

When To Use

The American Society for Training and Development suggests that the following situations might call for the use of interviews:

- To obtain input from individuals who express themselves in a verbal manner rather than in writing,
- To obtain input from individuals who prefer a personalized format and interchange rather than an anonymous mailing,
- To supplement and expand data collected using other methods,
- To explore complex and/or sensitive issues in which written survey instruments may be found to be too superficial,
- To question "experts" in the field in a detailed manner.

Advantages

- Questions can be clarified whenever necessary.
- Related or spontaneous questions can be added when needed or thought to be appropriate.
- Insights can be gleaned from the interviewee's tone of voice or, if face-to-face, from the interviewee's body language.
- The interviewer can change the tone and style of the interview to match that of the interviewee.

Disadvantages

- Interviews can be quite extensive and time-consuming, and, therefore, expensive. ASTD suggests, "use when survey time and dollars are plentiful."
- Effective interviewing skills are requisite to the successful use of this method and that requires adequate training, again, another expense.
- It may be difficult to find a time and a location to conduct the interview which is convenient to the interviewee and interviewer and when the interviewee will not be distracted or feel that the confidentiality of the interview is threatened.

Notes

Formats

The format of the interview may range from (1) open, to (2) semi-structured, to (3) structured. The more qualified the interviewer, the more open should be the format of the interview. The less qualified the interviewer is, the more structured should be the format. Openness and freedom to inject spontaneous questions, change the tone of the interview when needed, inject some humor or empathy as the situation may dictate, and to rephrase or clarify questions are advantages of, and reasons for utilizing an interview technique. If all of that flexibility is lost, and the data collector is dependent upon the use of totally structured interviews, consideration might be given to using an alternative method.

In most instances, the preferred format will be the semi-structured design. This requires the identification of key leading questions to provide direction for the interview and to assure coverage of the required data indicators, the identification of sub- or follow-up questions, the outline of a logical sequence for the interview, and the estimation of approximate time frames required to conduct the interview.

Tips For Effective Use

1. Develop an interview instrument to accommodate the format selected for the interview.

2. Field-test the interview instrument with representatives of the population to be interviewed.

3. Train the interviewers in effective interviewing and listening techniques. Provide time to practice with feedback from the trainer.

4. Follow the same guidelines for identifying the individuals to be interviewed as were noted for the mail survey method. Again, representative samples are of critical importance. Some experts suggest that four to six interviews may be sufficient when interviewing a homogeneous group.

5. Call the interviewee and arrange an appointment time and location for conducting the interview. If the interview is to be conducted by telephone, call several days in advance to arrange a convenient appointment time.

Notes

6. Whenever possible, conduct the interview in the interviewee's environment, or in an environment in which the interviewee will be comfortable. Should the interview be conducted in the interviewee's office, try to assure that there will be no outside interruptions during the course of the interview.

7. Try to arrange for the interview to be conducted during the middle of the week, mid-morning or early afternoon.

8. Dress in an appropriate manner. In most instances, office or business dress will probably be appropriate; in some situations, however, business dress may be intimidating.

9. Begin the interview with an expression of appreciation for the interviewee's time and cooperation, review the purpose of the interview, assure the confidentiality, ask permission to tape the interview and/or take written notes. It is suggested that *both* a tape recording, as well as key written notes be made during the interview to assure full coverage. Keep in mind that it takes as long to play back a tape as it did to conduct the interview, although a recorder with a counter can help immensely. At the same time, taking copious written notes during the interview can be quite distracting both to the interviewee and to the attentiveness of the interviewer. Common sense and balance are the operative words.

10. Follow the lead of the interviewee in determining style and tone of the interview. Do not talk down to the interviewee in any way. Remember, regardless of the status or background of the interviewee, he/she is the expert and the source of knowledge for that given interview.

11. Avoid expressing your personal opinions and biases, and avoid leading the interviewee in such a way as to imply the answer or response you expect.

12. Observe the interviewee's body language and learn from it. If the interviewee appears nervous, modify your style and approach to make him/her feel at ease.

13. Depending on the format of the interview, try to avoid having the interviewee ramble excessively in his/her responses. Instead, attempt to keep the interview targeted and purposeful.

NOTES

14. If the interviewee's response to a given question is vague, attempt to have him/her clarify or further explain the answer given. Listening skills are of critical importance here. A leading statement such as, "What I hear you saying is..." or, "Do I understand you correctly when I hear you say...?" places the responsibility for the misunderstanding or confusion on the interviewer rather than on the interviewee.

15. When you have completed the list of questions outlined for the interview, ask the interviewee if he/she has any questions. Take adequate time to address any questions which the interviewee may raise.

16. At the conclusion of the interview, thank the interviewee again for his/her time and cooperation. Offer to provide a copy of the results of the study should the participant so desire, and leave a business card with the interviewee suggesting that he/she call the interviewer should he/she want to ask any follow-up questions or provide any additional information.

NOTES

APPENDIX C: *Observations*

Using this technique, the data collector actually observes identified activities, events, and /or the behavior of individuals in a unobtrusive manner. This approach provides an opportunity to see actual situations and/or circumstances, rather than obtaining a "filtered description" of how people "think they see" a condition.

When To Use

ASTD identifies the following types of situations in which observations might be the preferred technique:

- To obtain background information on such topics as group dynamics or the work climate of an organization or institution;
- To supplement interviews and questionnaires;
- To validate information obtained from interviews and questionnaires;
- To investigate identified problems, e.g. communication problems, inefficient use of time, resources or personnel, declining operational standards or records of performance, or ineffective procedures;
- To identify positive or strong characteristics.

Advantages

- The observer obtains a definitive look at a typical situation, e.g. the actual reaction of students (verbal, body language and all) to certain menu items on the cafeteria line or the communication skills of food service assistants as they interact with students during the lunch period.
- The observation is unobtrusive, it minimizes disruptions in the workplace or of the activity observed.
- The observation can provide insights into possible causes of problems and/or of impacting conditions not typically gleaned from surveys or interviews.
- Costs involved to collect data can be relatively low.

Notes

Disadvantages

- If the observer is not trained and is not prepared to focus his/her attention on specifics, the observation may be a waste of time and money.
- Even for the trained observer, it is extremely difficult to record data and simultaneously observe a large number of people.
- If someone knows he/she is being observed, the behavior typically displayed may be modified to fit what he/she thinks the observer wants to see. It should be noted that contemporary researchers argue that observation, in itself, distorts reality regardless of how unobtrusive it may be.
- The process can be time consuming, or conversely, can provide a limited or superficial picture if only extraneous or nontypical situations are observed.

Tips For Effective Use

1. Identify the situation, condition and behavior(s) you want to observe. Be as specific as possible, so that you know the "indicators" which you want to observe. At the same time, be open to seeing the unexpected or unanticipated.

2. Determine the method to be used in recording the observations made, e.g. checklist, notation of written comments, videotaping, and/or using a small, unobtrusive tape recorder to note verbally the observations being made.

3. Determine when the verbal or written notations of the observations will be made, i.e. during the observation itself or upon completion. In most instances, it is preferable to record observations as they are taking place.

4. Determine whether you should take multiple observations of a given work site or condition, observe multiple work sites, and/or use multiple observers. In most instances, reliance on information taken from single observations is highly inadvisable. If a problem exists at a single or limited number of sites, conduct multiple observations or use multiple observers at that (those) site(s). If a condition or problem appears to be typical of a wide range of sites, identify representative sample sites (rural/urban, large/small, homogenous/multicultural) to be observed, and conduct observations or use multiple observers at those sites.

NOTES

5. Train the observers. Include within the training the technique of having all the observers view the same situation simultaneously and then contrast their observations and notes. This will help each individual begin to "see" with different eyes and from different perspectives, as well as help to enhance the reliability and validity of the data. The old adage, "it's in the eye of the beholder," is of critical importance.

6. Make a judgment call as to whether the individuals to be observed should be notified in advance. Some will argue that only "the best foot will be put forward" if advance notification is given, while others will conversely argue that it is the courteous thing to do. A compromise may be appropriate such as giving advance notice, but not specifying the exact day or time the observations will be made. The nature of the observations to be made and/or the personal rapport between the observer(s) and the individuals to be observed may be the determining factors to this question.

7. Be as unobtrusive as possible to enhance authenticity of observations.

8. Upon completion of the observation, spend some quiet time reflecting on what you saw and heard so that you can add any intuitive insights you may have gleaned from the situation to your observation report. Again, contemporary research indicates that it is not all in the data. Intuitive judgments are just as valid - in some cases, more so - than measurable data.

Notes

APPENDIX D: *Data Reviews*

Living in the world of rapidly accelerated computer technology, every office has access to reams of data. In many instances, we have more data than we could ever digest. Thus, the question may be asked, "why collect more?" Data reviews may be an appropriate technique to use to answer that question. This needs assessment technique involves identifying existing data needed for the specific needs assessment objective.

When To Use

- To gather background information and obtain a general sense of the mode of operation or the typical condition/culture of an organization,
- To verify information gathered from other assessment techniques,
- To get a picture of how particular problems have influenced individuals and/or given situations.

Advantages

- Data reviews can often point to the identification of specific problems as well as to the causes of specific problems. For example, if a given group of district CNP directors are continuously over budget, a review of their procurement systems and purchasing patterns may reveal the probable causes of the problem.
- Data reviews can be expedient as records can be reviewed quickly, at a time convenient to the needs analyst, and, if the data are stored electronically, can be accessed at any time and at any place, including the home office via a modem and a computer. These factors contribute to the relative inexpensiveness of the technique.
- The technique will rarely, if ever, disrupt the work of others.

Disadvantages

- The data or records to be reviewed may be inaccessible, out of date, or incomplete.
- If the records are in the form of quarterly or annual reports, they may focus on the positive aspects of the situation or organization, and overlook or selectively "edit out" the problem areas.

Notes

Tips For Effective Use

1. Determine the comprehensiveness, authenticity, and timeliness of the records or data to be reviewed. Is it relevant to the current situation and/or to the projected future?

2. Determine which data items, files, or reports will be the most valuable to you. Be selective in identifying those data files which hold the most promise for identifying problems, factors contributing to the causes of problems, and/or ideas for improvement.

3. Determine the accessibility of the data. If the data banks or records are difficult or inordinately time-consuming to access, weigh the potential value of their review against the use of another technique.

4. Spend more time synthesizing the data than analyzing the data. Look for patterns, trends, interrelationships, and holistic scenarios rather than dwelling on isolated facts or instances. Seeing the whole picture in perspective is of greater value in program planning than seeing a limited piece of the puzzle.

5. As with the observation technique, after reviewing numerous data sources, spend some time away from the materials reflecting on what you have learned. As the specific quantitative data begin to blur in your mind, look for the intuitive insights you can distill from your data reviews.

Notes

APPENDIX E: *Focus Groups*

This technique involves bringing together a select group of individuals to focus their attention on and generate ideas about a given situation, problem, or topic.

When To Use

- To bring an array of expertise to bear on solving a particular problem and/or creating new, more effective strategies for improvement; or
- To elicit diversity of opinion existing among various groups relative to a particular question or problem, or to identify strategies for building effective bridges among multicultural or different representative groups.

Advantages

- This technique obtains the focused attention and input of a select group of people on a given issue or topic.
- Ideas can be generated quickly, and more effective solutions and/or strategies may be identified than could be obtained in one-on-one interviews and/or via surveys.

Disadvantages

- Groups may be expensive to assemble because of the background, expertise, and or geographical location of the individuals selected.
- Confrontations and/or stalemates in discussions may occur because of the diversity of opinion among the group or because some members assume a prima donna countenance.

Tips For Effective Use

1. Select those individuals whose input can be of greatest value. This would suggest avoiding selections based primarily on friendship, politics, or position.

2. Assemble the group at a time most convenient to the majority of the members of the group, and at a time unencumbered from other responsibility and distractions. For example, if possible, avoid conducting a focus group session during a national or State conference.

NOTES

3. Conduct the focus group sessions in an informal, relaxed environment, e.g. at a retreat center. Encourage the members to wear comfortable clothing and put everyone on a first name basis.

4. Although outcome objectives and suggested, general time frames of activity should be identified for the group, do not establish or attempt to follow a set agenda; instead be willing to move with the flow and energy of the group.

5. Be explicit in identifying the issue, problem, question, or situation to be addressed. Write the issue on a flip chart, or use an overhead transparency to keep the issue ever present in the minds of the group members.

6. Encourage the extensive use of flip charts, and display the sheets around the room to stimulate discussion and to assure the participation of all group members.

7. Utilize an array of group discussion and brainstorming techniques to stimulate discussion and to assure the participation of all group members.

8. Utilize conflict resolution techniques when appropriate.

9. Select the focus group leader or moderator with care. He or she must be an effective group and discussion leader. Forget seniority or rank-it's ability that counts.

10. If appropriate, consider using an outside facilitator to help enhance the dialogue and interactions of the group.

NOTES

APPENDIX F: *NET Material Profile Instrument*

Section I: *Identifying Information*

Title____

Author____

Publisher/Address____

Date of Publication__________Holder of Copyright____________________

Type of
Material____

Intended
User____

Planned User in
State____

Section 2: *Instructional Design*

Goal/Purpose/MajorObjectives____________________________
____
____
____
____

TRAINING METHODOLOGY	YES	NO	SOMEWHAT
A. Active participation of learners.	☐	☐	☐
B. Variety of learning experiences.	☐	☐	☐

EVALUATION	YES	NO	SOMEWHAT
A. Formative evaluation.	☐	☐	☐
B. Summative evaluation.	☐	☐	☐

Notes

Section 3: *Reviewer Evaluation*

Design Consistency	Yes	No	Somewhat
A. Objectives are realistic.	☐	☐	☐
B. Content supports objectives.	☐	☐	☐
C. Learning activities support objectives.	☐	☐	☐
D. Evaluation measures attainment of objectives.	☐	☐	☐

Scientific Reliability	Yes	No	Somewhat
A. Terminology is used correctly.	☐	☐	☐
B. Content is generally accepted knowledge in the area or accurately documented.	☐	☐	☐
C. Conclusions are drawn from information presented.	☐	☐	☐
D. Only proven theories are presented as fact.	☐	☐	☐

Design Quality	Yes	No	Somewhat
A. Print is easy to read.	☐	☐	☐
B. Readability level is appropriate.	☐	☐	☐
C. Page layout and design is appropriate for the intended audience.	☐	☐	☐
D. Illustrations are appropriate and enhance the design.	☐	☐	☐
E. Sound quality is good.	☐	☐	☐

Notes

Use the back of this form for evaluative comments regarding appropriateness of the material for the intended audience in the State. If revisions are needed to improve the material, please summarize suggestions.

Reviewer
Name____

Title______________________________Telephone____________

Date of
Review____

NOTES

Appendix G: *Summary of ASFSA Master Plan For Education*

The ASFSA Professional Development Handbook (Revised November 1988) includes the following description of the Master Plan for Education.

One of ASFSA's purposes is to develop and encourage the highest standards and provide education programs for professional development of school and nutrition personnel. The Master Plan contains the standards and specifications for personnel needed to produce quality food and nutrition education service to America's children.

The Master Plan for Education is a design for a comprehensive professional development program. The Professional Development plan includes standards for academic and formal training, recommended position titles and descriptions, functions and tasks, knowledge and skills, and certification. Certification requirements are based on accepted standards. The certification plan promotes advancement in the profession by offering initial certification with required academic and specialized education and by encouraging members to progress to higher levels. The Master Plan is a career ladder that personnel can use to progress from an entry-level food service assistant to a system-level food service director. It builds upon standards and plans that have been developed since ASFSA's beginning in 1946.

The ASFSA Master Plan established a voluntary certification program for all levels of members employed in school nutrition programs. The Master Plan defines five position levels for CNP personnel: general assistant, technical assistant, manager, supervisor/specialist, and director/administrator. Each position title includes academic requirements and formal training provided as staff development programs. The minimum requirement for formal training is a ten-hour sanitation program with a planned curriculum. In many States, a significant number of school nutrition managers and assistants want to begin their certification process by completing this course. The need for continuing education for ASFSA-certified personnel to meet their certification requirements provides important input in designing training programs for CNP personnel within a State.

For more information about the Master Plan or to obtain a copy of the ASFSA Professional Development Handbook (1988), contact the American School Food Service Association.

Notes

APPENDIX H: *NET Regulations*

The following Section of 7 CFR Part 227 describes the 15 areas to be addressed in the needs assessment process. The pages referred to in parenthesis ( ) indicate where each area is addressed in this document.

7 CFR Part 227

SECTION 227.36 Requirements of needs assessment

(a) The needs assessment is an ongoing process which identifies the discrepancies between "what should be" and "what is" and shall be applied to each category listed below to enable State agencies to determine their nutrition education and training needs for each year. The needs assessment shall identify the following as a minimum:

(1) **Children, teachers, and food service personnel in need of nutrition education and training;**
(Refer to page 8, 19, 20)

(2) **existing State or federally funded nutrition education and training programs including their:**
- (i) **Goals and objectives;**
- (ii) **source and level of funding;**
- (iii) **any available documentation of their relative success or failure; and**
- (iv) **factors contributing to their success or failure.**

(Refer to pages 8, 18, 19, 25)

(3) **offices or agencies at the State and local level designated to be responsible for nutrition education and training of teachers and school foodservice personnel;**
(Refer to page 8, 28)

(4) **any relevant State nutrition education mandates;**
(Refer to pages 8, 14, 20, 25)

(5) **funding levels at the State and local level for preservice and inservice nutrition education and training of foodservice personnel and teachers;**
(Refer to pages i, 4, 25)

(6) **State and local individuals, and groups conducting nutrition education and training;**
(Refer to pages 25, 26, 28)

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(7) **materials which are currently available for nutrition education and training programs, and determine for each:**

(i) **Subject area and content covered;**

(ii) **grade level;**

(iii) **how utilized;**

(iv) **acceptability by user;**

(v) **currency of materials;**

(Refer to pages 8, 25, 27)

(8) **any major child nutrition related health problems in each State;**

(Refer to pages 8, 26)

(9) **existing sources of primary and secondary data, including any data that has been collected for documenting the State's nutrition education and training needs;**

(Refer to pages 8, 16, 19, 20)

(10) **available documentation of the competencies of teachers in the area of nutrition education;**

(Refer to pages 8, 22, 24)

(11) **available documentation of the competencies of foodservice personnel;**

(Refer to pages 8, 22, 24)

(12) **problems encountered by schools and institutions in procuring nutritious food economically and in preparing nutritious appetizing meals and areas where training can assist in alleviating these problems;**

(Refer to pages 8, 21)

(13) **problems teachers encounter in conducting effective nutrition education activities and areas where inservice training or materials can assist in alleviating these problems;**

(Refer to pages 8, 24, 25)

(14) **problems in dietary habits of children and areas where nutrition education may assist in positive changes;**

(Refer to pages 8, 16, 20, 26)

(15) **problems encountered in coordinating the nutrition education by teachers with the meal preparation and activities of the foodservice facility and areas where training might alleviate these problems.**

(Refer to pages 8, 21)

(b) The needs assessment should be an ongoing process and provide not only data on current activities but also a description of the problems and needs in each category and whether training or materials would help alleviate the identified problems.

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